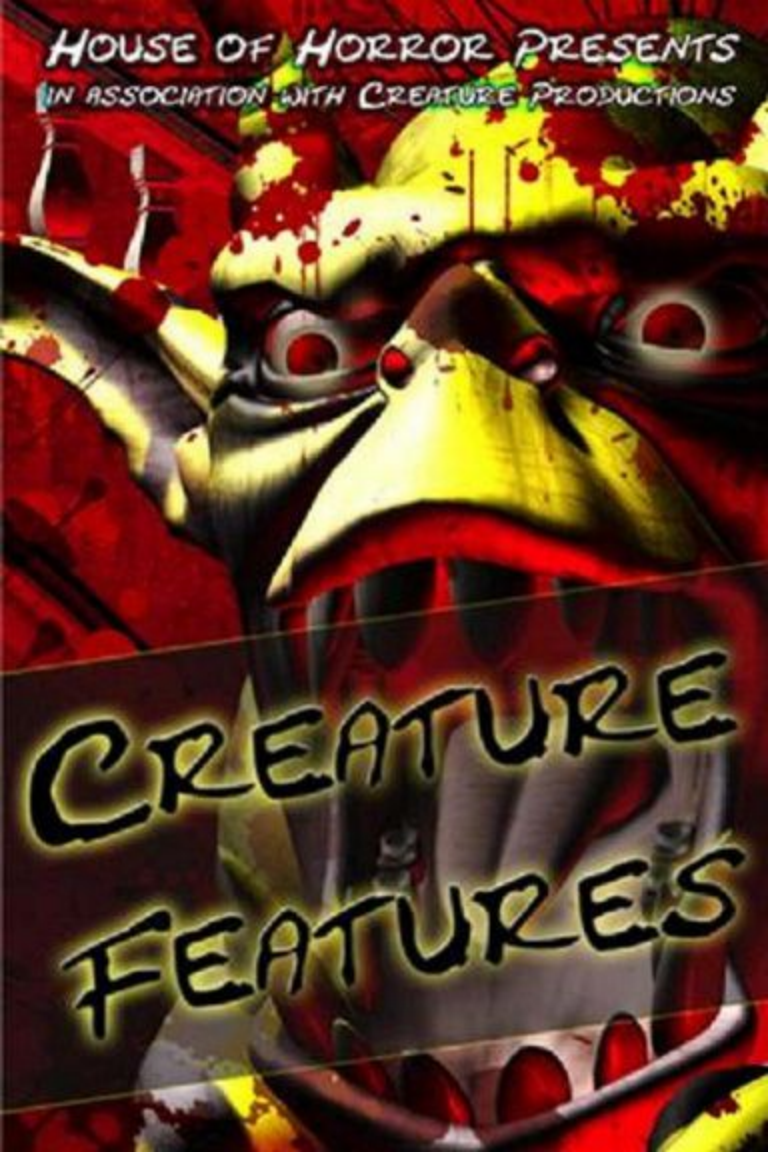

HOUSE OF HORROR PRESENTS
IN ASSOCIATION WITH CREATURE PRODUCTIONS
CREATURE
FEATURES

House of Horror Presents

'Creature Features'

In association with Creature Productions



Edited by S.E.COX
Illustrated by Shane McKenzie

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Acknowledgments

Firstly a big thank you, goes out to all of the writers who submitted their stories to us. For this anthology, we were absolutely inundated with submissions and unfortunately could only pick thirty of the best, but we wish those who didn't make the cut, the best of luck placing their stories elsewhere.

A huge thank you to John C. Lewis, producer of Creature Productions, who came aboard this project and helped read a massive amount of submissions. His clear and constructive comments really helped a lot of writers whether they did or didn't get in.

Once again the amazing Kaolin Fire came through for use with a wonderful cover. This guy is the biz! Look him up.

Last but not least a big thank you to my two co-editors, Shane McKenzie and Charlotte Gledson. Shane is responsible for the wonderful sketches that accompany each and every story, and Charlotte for the opening poem entitled 'Creature Features.'

With the amount of work that has gone into producing this collection of creature horror stories, it would not have been possible without the help and support of everyone mention here. I thank you all.

'Creature Features'

A Poem by Charlotte Emma Gledson, artwork by Kyle Naden



Within the detritus of rotten weeds
Tentacles writhe and worm
A gaping mouth with tombstone teeth
Anticipates – with a stare that holds her firm

Upon the bridge she stoops to search
For her purse that fell below
As the oily appendage drags her down
They thrash and fight, her blood does flow

She stares into the bulbous eyes
A vision from an amphibian hell
Looping a muculent arm around her neck
Into an abyss of terror she finally fell

A crack, a snap her neck is torn
Her head now free to fall
A slimy feeler starts to feed
As a host of limbs begin to maul

After gorging on the tasty meal
Its skin now turns a repellent green
The leathery crust is revitalized
With willowy fingers, it starts to preen

The creature with the abominable features
Lets out an evocative laugh
It huddles in wait in the deep murky water
Would you ever dare to cross its path?

'Introduction'

John C. Lewis
Producer of Creature Productions

Hello dear reader.

You hold in your hands a unique collection of stories entitled; "Creature Features." The stories held within these pages feature things which go far beyond the vampires and zombies usually categorized as "Creatures." These are the "other" creatures. Things that hide under our beds and within the confines of our closets. Things that slither and crawl and climb up walls. Flying nightmares which haunt the nighttime skies. Things that stalk the waterways of the world in which we live. Things that move within the shadows in the corridors of our minds. Things that go bump in the night. Things so frightening that we call them...MONSTERS.

Some would argue that monsters are real, that they are not just figments of our collective imaginations. There are reports of such things everyday all around the world. Bigfoot, Sasquatch, The Florida Skunk Ape, the Mighty Yeti of the Himalayas are all seen regularly.

Researchers have found hair samples, footprints, and have actually photographed these "Creatures" of legend. Still, the rational being inside us tells us these things do not exist, they cannot exist!

The Jersey Devil, Mothman, Spring-Heel Jack, all creatures of Legend, all said to exist, all sighted hundreds of times. Still, we say thee nay, such things are not real.

The Loch Ness Monster, Ogopogo, The Crater Lake Monster, and similar amphibious creatures are sighted the world over, some even being photographed. Still, believers in such things are scoffed at, for these things do not exist.

The Mongolian Death Worm, a creature that is said to haunt the remote areas of the Gobi Desert where it spits acid

at its intended prey or discharges electricity over quite a distance for the same purpose. Spotted numerous times, there is still no hard evidence of the worm's existence.

The Chupacabra of Puerto Rico's "El Junque," now spread all over Central America and into Texas are spotted frequently, leaving behind a legacy of dead and maimed animals in their wake. These devilish imps with glowing eyes and razor sharp teeth are said to be a by-product of a military base located in Puerto Rico which was ravaged by Hurricane Andrew. Officials laugh at the notion yet no Chupacabra had been seen before the deadly storm.

The Mighty Thunderbirds of American Indian Legend. Birds so large they can easily carry away a human being. Birds still seen today in canyon lands, in the Western United States and remote areas of Alaska. Are they just Condors or large Stellar Eagles as scientists believe? Or do the mighty Thunderbirds still fly the skies of the modern world?

These are just samples of the hundreds, maybe thousands of creatures too monstrous to allow a foothold into our fragile fabric of reality. Do you believe in Monsters? Maybe you do, maybe you don't but here are the facts. Giant squids, huge whales, terrifying man-eating Sharks and Crocodiles all share our waterways. Tigers and ferocious bears still roam the forests of the world. Electric Eels and Catfish also live in the world of man, both capable of delivering quite a shock when touched. Giant catfish capable of attacking and killing human beings still swim the rivers of the world. Are all of these "Creatures" not monsters as well? What makes them less "monstrous?" Is it the fact that they are real, that we know them to exist? Does that de-classify their monstrous status to that of just mere animals?

I know, you're probably wondering if I believe in monsters. Well, let me relate a couple very short stories. In 1968 a few of us were collecting turtles in a small lake when an alligator closed in on our position. At about five feet in length it posed no threat to us. It went underwater and I

slapped my net down where it was to scare the animal off. Well somehow net and animal met and we found ourselves in a huge struggle between boys and monster, water splashing everywhere. In 1974 a friend of mine and I were climbing around in the rocky foothills behind our hotel in Arizona. We had gone a little farther out than we should have as darkness began to take away the natural light of day. Making our way back down the hillside we got the strangest feeling that something was following us. The path became somewhat cryptic as the night sky loomed ever closer. Then we heard the sliding, loose pebbles. Something was following us.

We never bothered to turn around as we shot down the hillside and straight for the safety of our room. In 1979, while helping a friend tend "wild animals" used for a car commercial, something went terribly wrong and a 450 pound man-eating (and wounded) Tiger escaped the shooting arena. It came at me on two different occasions, appearing almost invisible in the surrounding forest, before running off. The only thing that saved me was years of animal experience and quick thinking. Had it been able to reach me, the monstrous cat would have quickly ended my life. The animal was eventually captured and returned to its pen. In 1990, while boating up the Suwannee River from the Gulf side I finally saw what I'd been waiting for my whole life. In a dense part of the forest I saw a legendary Skunk Ape about fifty feet inside the forest. It was stooped over and when it stood we stared at each other, eye-to-eye. This was no bear. The stare was that of an intelligent being. After passing a huge tree I looked only to find it was gone. One other person in the boat "thought" they saw it. In 2005 while hunting animals at night on the roads of South Florida my friend and I pulled off the highway in a forbidden area near Turkey Point Nuclear Power Plant to check along a very clear brackish creek. In no time at all we spotted the form of a huge Alligator resting on the bottom of the creek. It was a beautiful animal still entirely covered with the bright yellow markings of a juvenile. We watched as it slowly walked across the bottom of the canal,

never once breaking the surface for air. At 8-10 feet in length, we were looking at an ancient animal which was truly a sight to behold...a monster.

So, do I believe in monsters? Yes I do. The evidence for them is all around us. We find new ones all the time and try to dismiss those already discovered as just "animals." Remember, the mountain Gorilla was considered a legendary "Creature" until its discovery around 1910. The Coelacanth, a giant lobe-finned fish believed to have become extinct with the dinosaurs still roams the deep waters between the Comoro Islands and mainland Africa. Giant Squids wash up on beaches occasionally reminding us they are still out there. The bones of thousands of Dinosaurs, many the size of houses, have been discovered all over the world. They too are very real.

So while contemplating the reality of monsters enjoy the thirty stories you are about to read. All contain monsters of various size and form.

There are lake monsters like the Morgoth, Earthen creatures summoned by a storm from their underground labyrinths, things hidden in forgotten warehouses, creatures of legend brought forth from a primeval forest, a creature that stalks the alleyways of a city, a beast ripped from the soul of a man. Yes these and many other "creatures" await you. So sit back, relax, and let fear and terror be your companions as you travel through the world of... "Creature Features."

Oh, and remember, the next time you or anyone you know says they hear something in the closet, be careful when you open that door. After all, there may be more than skeletons hidden in there.

Pleasant Screams!

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'Earthen Demons'

Kerry Morgan



Sherry worked at the local post office, a hot spot for all things rumor mill worthy, and boy was it working over time today. On this morning, she heard a rumor which still had her mind reeling during her afternoon walk. Light brown and graying, her stylish hair floated about her head in the gentle September wind, a softer preview of the storm about to hit their area. What if the rumors were true? Listening to Monica's description of what happened entertained Sherry for the better part of a half an hour. Little three foot gargoyles with two sets of teeth. Fangs and a row of rounded molars; sporting forked tails, crawled up from the ground during the last rain storm.

Monica was positive she watched the creatures tear apart her Emus and then half her goat, ripping her animal's limb from limb, sucking the bone marrow but leaving the rest to rot in the rain. She also claimed they used the bigger bones as drums to pound on the ground like toddlers playing with pots and pans in the rain. Sherry rolled her eyes remembering the image of Monica's enthusiastic account.

She really believed with all her heart the creatures had played drums in the rain and mud with her Emus' bones. "Poor Monica," Sherry thought, "She just hasn't been the same since the loss of her daughter in that car crash."

Creatures which ate livestock and farm animals during lightning storms? Sherry wasn't sure she believed this one, despite Monica's insistence. Playing drums in the mud? "That's just nutty." She whispered. Sherry shook her head to rid herself of the image. As she walked, her footsteps clacked against the pavement. She stepped on a tack at work; the sharpened point didn't touch her foot, but effectively lodged itself so she couldn't remove it from her shoe. The gentle reminder, that all things can become unbalanced, even walking shoes, kept a smile on her face. She could hear the rhythm. Clack, silence, clack, silence, clack, silence until finally a wayward rain drop graced her nose and thunder rolled across the sky. The storm wasn't supposed to start yet, but try telling that to the New Hampshire skies, as the wild water rolled off her hood less wind breaker. Sherry hoped to avoid the rain on her walk, but now she made a bee line to the little shelter for those waiting for the public transit system which sat half way to the little brick and mortar mom and pop grocery.

Sherry ducked under the clear plastic roof glancing at the dark beams holding everything together. She shook hair, a spray of rain drops showering the wooden bench with water. Removing a Kleenex from her pocket, Sherry cleaned off the bench and sat down with a deep sigh. As she settled in to wait out the storm, her eyes focused on the yard of the house right across the street from the shelter she hid in.

The rain was really coming down, now, and all the water created a puddle in the lawn. "Wouldn't want to own that house," She thought as she watched the puddle grow into a pond. Yet as she continued to observe the rain pour down ruining flower beds and turning the driveway into a muddy mess, she noticed something rather odd. Bits of mud were popping back up into the air as the rain hit the ground. In a good rain storm that wouldn't usually be unusual except for the fact that some of these globs of dirt were actually hitting the roof of the house. Rain didn't come down that hard.

Sherry felt her eyes drawn down the street as she heard the oddest rhyme off in the distance in between the heavy beat of raindrops above her. Training her eyes to discover the source of the song, she saw three little girls playing out in the rain. They were swinging a jump rope and all singing the same tune in time with their jumps…

Earthen Demons
Live under toes
Digging further
Than anyone goes

When it rains and
Thunder rolls
Earthen Demons
Rise up - from below

They dig up high
To touch the sky
Eating children
For telling lies

Fascinated, Sherry stood up and leaned against the side of the shelter trying to see threw the sheets of rain. The children were precious and creepy all at the same time. Floral Sunday dresses getting soaked in the storm, with matching ribbons bouncing with each jump. They kept repeating the same eerie song over and over again. "What a terrible song to let your children jump rope to." Sherry thought to herself, as she turned back to the yard where the mud acted more like scavenging starlings than Earth. Catching glimpses here and there, she realized that the mud wasn't just popping up because of the rain; it was being tossed up and away from the ground. How could mud be thrown upwards unless…

A gnarled claw reached up into the air from under the earth and threw a handful of mud toward the street. Right

before her eyes, a brown head followed the gnarly black claw and pulled a body up out of the ground. Squinting harder, she saw that it stood about three feet tall, and blended almost perfectly with the rain. The coloring of the creature matched its surroundings perfectly and seemed to move around on top of its skin which looked like old worn leather to Sherry.

The creature lifted its jaw into the air and opened its mouth. The lower jaw-bone jerked outward and down appearing to dislocate. It did this strange action making a terrible popping sound, three times until its mouth looked more like a crane's gulping down a fish. As the creature stood there with its gaping maw to the sky, its extra large dark eyes leaked a long line of clear slime reaching all the way to the ground before breaking off with a long blink from a thin eye lid. A bulbous, studded forked tail switched back and forth behind it, like cats might prepare for a kill. Several other creatures soon followed, looking just as grotesque, digging their own way out of the ground to stand next to the first one in the middle of the yard.

Sherry stood inside the bus station stunned. These things matched the description Monica gave of the creatures that ate her livestock. Little, gargoyle looking carnivores waiting for…

Earthen Demons
Live under toes
Digging further
Than anyone goes

When it rains and
Thunder rolls
Earthen Demons
Rise up - from below

They dig up high
To touch the sky
run little children

and save your lives…

The children still sang though the rhyme changed. It seemed to fog and distract Sherry from the inside out. Shocking her out of her awe a bright flash of light crackled and clapped and struck directly into the mouth of one of the awaiting creatures across the street. Sherry startled, as the creature's body lit up from the inside with a green glow. It hung suspended in the air sparking with electricity in the rain then raced around the yard making loud chirping sounds. A dog began to bark, and came running from the back yard only to get tackled by the creature.

The creature held the dog firmly within its black claws and bit right into the dog's torso. Blood gushed out of the dog's center as the creature lifted its head, to gulp down things from inside the dog that Sherry did not want to identify. The dog gave a single yelp then remained silent.

Two more creatures were struck, and floated in the air as electricity energized their bodies like little glow sticks. After their rush of lightning, these two tore about the yard. One of the gargoyle things sniffed the dog but the creature already engrossed in its meal snarled at it. The other backed away slowed looking around the yard for something else to munch.

That's when the two raging creatures saw Sherry. She knew it immediately for they stopped racing and faced her from across the street. They clapped their dislocated jaws together, levitated in the air for a split second before landing back to the ground in a dead run right toward Sherry.

She screamed, eyes searching wildly for a place to hide. The only place she could get to fast enough was the roof of the bus shelter. As she grabbed the outside edge of the building she couldn't help but look back to see the demons still racing toward her. They would catch her in seconds. Whimpering with fear she found a hold and pulled her body up just as something grabbed and jerked at her foot. Yanking her away from safety It slammed her against the street with unimaginable strength.

The first bite was excruciating. Its unhinged jaw clamped down around her calf and sank into the bone with its jagged teeth. Sherry could feel everything even through the pain. Fangs had gouged into her shin bone while a row of smaller more rounded teeth ground their way through her skin to reach the white treasure buried within. She could feel its scratchy cat like tongue lapping at whatever juices she bled.

Furious that she'd been caught she pulled back a fist and punched the Earthen Demon right in the face as it suckled her leg. The creature blinked, a clear slime covering its eyes with a thick goop but didn't seem fazed by her hit at all. Sherry pulled her fist back again only to have a second creature clamp its jaws around it.

Sherry screamed again as its tongue scraped at her skin and those sharp teeth sunk into her flesh looking for bone. Sprawled out on the street rain smashing against her face Sherry was crying when the words of the rhyme in the distance invaded her ears.

Earthen Demons
Live under toes
Digging further
Than anyone goes

When it rains and
Thunder rolls
Earthen Demons
Rise up - from below

They dig up high
To touch the sky
Eating children
Till satisfied…

Sherry screamed toward the children. "Help me. Help me, get your parents. They're getting me." She cried as loud as she could, but the three little girls didn't seem to hear her.

They continued to jump rope and sing the horrific tune ignoring her cries for help.

Sherry kicked and fought as hard as she could as more of the demons surrounded her, picking places to bite. One creature started making strange sounds not two inches from her face.

Clack, clack, click, gulp, clack. The thing spit in her face as it spoke, the sounds emanating from its dislocated jaw. It ground it's bloodied teeth together opened its mouth further than it should be able to go and chomped right down on her right shoulder.

She had five of the creatures suckling on her bones. She could no longer fight, her tears streamed silently in the rain and dried upon her deadly still face, lying against the pavement of the street.

The activity didn't end with Sherry's death. Once the demons realized the life had fled from their meal, they started slashing at her skin with their thick black claws, easily tearing the flesh from her bones. Bits of Sherry covered the street, blood flowing in little rivers of rain water toward the sewer drain. Licking at the bones they had torn from her body until they shone with that clear slime, the demons ate until they were satisfied.

White bones in hand the first thump against the pavement splintered a knee cap on the end. Click, click, clack gulp. Thump, thump, thump. The beat continued strangely meshing with the song the little girls sang. Click, click, clack, gulp. Thump, thump, thump.

Earthen Demons
Live under toes
Digging further
Than anyone goes

When it rains and
Thunder rolls
Earthen Demons

Rise up - from below

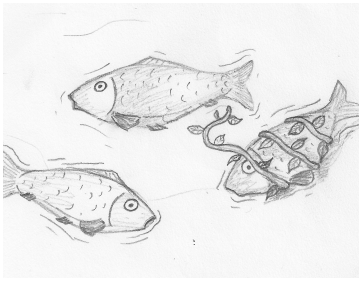
They dig up high
To touch the sky
Eating, Eating,
till satisfied…

As the rain began to stop, the little girls threw their jump rope onto the ground and ran inside the house they were playing in front of. The Earthen Demons gathered their treasures and piled all the bones and bits of flesh in the middle of road. Then just as the first rays of sunlight tried to peek through the clouds, they went back to the holes they had dug and jumped down inside. All the holes then refilled with earth from beneath the ground, as if the soil rose up itself to heal the Earth's wounds.

The skies brightened as the storm drifted away, the Earthen Demons done for the day.

'The Lake'

Jack Burton



Michael sat huddled in the bow of the fishing boat, fighting to keep his gaze on the billowy clouds that drifted overhead. Their soothing shapes helped calm the boy and divert his attention from the fact that he was cold, tired, and emotionally drained. Every few minutes, however, his gaze broke from the cotton candy formations and he made the mistake of looking to the rear of the boat. Each time he did, he saw his father's body slumped against the stern and was painfully reminded that this was no dream. His father was indeed dead.

Daniel Nicols had taken his son to Lake Vladis to celebrate his ninth birthday. Michael had only fished two other times and was excited for the opportunity to get away with his father. For Michael, the lake was a magical place. A tucked away secret made for father-son bonding, an escape from school, chores and the monotony of weekdays.

By 1:57pm their row boat was positioned in the middle of the lake, Michael was having a blast and the pair had caught four large carp. By 2:13pm, however, the obese Mr. Nicols began to break into a cold sweat. His chest felt like it was caving in and he began to struggle for air. The pain in his upper body became unbearable and within ten minutes his life slipped away.

Michael had been paralyzed by the unprecedented events. At nine-years-old he knew that all living creatures eventually died. But the boy had never actually met death. He had never watched it suck the last breath out of a life. Not from a dog, not even a goldfish and certainly never a family member. When he realized that his father would never wake up, Michael fell apart.

He had sobbed for over an hour. When his ducts finally dried up and there were no more tears or snot that could pour out of his tiny face, he crawled to the bow and tried to rest his heaving chest by watching the sky. Even though he was relatively calm for the moment, the situation had not changed. His father remained lifeless, the boat lay motionless upon the water and Michael was still hopelessly alone.

It was now 4:30, watching the clouds had gotten him nowhere and Michael knew that it was time to take action. Help might not arrive for a long time and he really didn't want to spend the night trapped in the boat.

But What can I do?

Michael's small frame didn't allow him to hold both oars simultaneously and row back the way his father had. Even if he removed one oar from its holder and tried to paddle the boat would simply turn in a circle. He had to come up with a better idea. And fast.

I could swim, Michael contemplated, kneeling over the port's edge and peering down into the murky water.

Michael was a strong swimmer for his age and felt confident he could reach the shore in no time. Yet there was something gnawing at the back of his brain, something holding him back from entering the cold lake. The problem, he realized, was not the water itself, but rather what lay under the placid surface of the lake.

He was accustomed to pools, and Lake Vladis was a far cry from his grandmother's swimming pool. Who knew what kind of aquatic life called the lake home. Michael was

mindful of common fish, carp, catfish and such, but there was always the possibility of larger fish. Unfriendly fish.

Although he was no expert on the subjects, Michael had heard stories of sharks, alligators and piranhas. He didn't know what countries they resided in or whether they were salt or fresh animals, but he knew they were deadly, and he knew they lived in water.

Michael continued to peer into the mirrored surface, straining his eyes to see deeper into its secret world. The water suddenly rippled before his eyes causing the boat to groan and rock gently. He pulled back from the edge of the boat.

I can't swim it. There could be anything under there.

Michael looked back at his father's bloated body, head slumped back, one meaty arm hanging over the gunwale. His gaze moved to the open cooler which contained the few fish they had caught. The heat must have been getting to the fish because a rotten smell crept into Michael's nostrils. He prayed it was the fish. He didn't want to think that the man he called "Daddy" was already festering in the summer sun.

The rancid smell infused him with fresh energy and a thirst to escape.

I'm gonna get outta here! Even if it means swimming! He vowed with confidence.

Dad wouldn't want me to be scared. He taught me to be brave and to do what needs to be done. He'd want me to find help and take care of mom.

Choosing action over further pity for himself, Michael decided to try rowing back. If it failed, he would suck up his fears, enter the chilly waters and swim back. He knew his father would have been proud of the decision.

Unable to bear the smell any longer, Michael grabbed the cooler and dumped the fish back into the lake. The ice began to melt and dissipate leaving only dead fish floating on the surface. He pushed the empty cooler towards his father's legs and laid both fishing poles against the bottom of the boat.

Since it was impossible for him to row with both oars the way his father had, Michael's plan relied on him being able to move fast. He took one oar in his hands and dropped to his knees. He would have to paddle on one side than quickly jump to the other, similar to a canoe, to prevent the boat from circling itself. The problem was rowboats were much heavier and much wider than canoes.

He gripped the wooden oar ready to begin when he heard a *kerplunk* in the water. He looked over the starboard side. Only three of the four dead fish remained.

A green tendril of leaves suddenly breached the surface. It rose into the air and reminded Michael of the climbing vines that grew on the side of their house. The vine swiveled, and then descended upon one of the lifeless carp, wrapping itself around the carcass.

Michael tightened his grip on the wooden oar as the tendril effortlessly pulled the carp into the depths of the lake. Michael didn't stop staring until the two were swallowed up by the darkness below.

Time to go, he thought.

Michael dipped the oar into the lake and as he did, the green vine returned.

He froze again at the sight of the peculiar plant that snaked out of the lake like a hypnotized cobra. As if dancing to an unseen pungi player, the vine rose up by the motionless oar and twisted around its lowest part. The plant tendril continued to rise up the oar and Michael just watched unsure if he should try to keep paddling or simply remain still.

Before he had time to make a decision the plant uncoiled its grasp as if realizing the oar was not food and instead stretched up toward the sky. Now, turning and circling in a small circumference, the leafy vine appeared to be smelling out its surroundings.

Free of the unusual creature, Michael wasted no time pushing the oar down and back with all his might. The heavy boat lurched forward and to the left. The vine jumped backwards and stood erect. Michael scrambled to the other

side of the boat and repeated rowing. The boat moved further forward and slightly back to the right.

I can do this! Just as long as I keep moving a little forward each time.

The movement disrupted the water and the two remaining carp rolled upon ripples toward the stern of the boat. The tendril changed course and pursued the dead food. Over his shoulder Michael watched it capture and claim another fish same as before. He continued to paddle despite his growing curiosity of the unknown lake creature.

Maybe it's some sort of underwater Venus fly trap, he thought, *pulling deceased prey down to its mouth.*

After fifteen minutes he was exhausted but had managed to gain about twenty feet. He lay down against the hull to rest.

He felt confident that despite the arduous process, he could reach shore within the hour. Daniel suddenly shifted in the back of the boat.

"Dad!" Michael cried, rising to his feet. He rushed towards his father assuming he was still alive.

I made a mistake, he's okay!

Michael laid his tiny hands against his father's hulking frame and shook him. "Dad, wake up!" The fifty-year-old remained silent. "Dad?" Michael's hope faded away.

Not wanting to have to stare into his father's lifeless eyes again, Michael turned his head in sadness. To his surprise and horror the leafed vine, which had to be a tentacle of sorts, was not only back but had wrapped its glistening body around the lower half of his father's forearm, causing the movement.

"Let go," Michael yelled, taking hold of his father's arm. He attempted to pull Daniel's arm from the water and back into the boat. The tentacle heaved forward but maintained its vice grip on the old man. Michael yanked again, this time the plant creature did not budge. Feeling satisfied that it had won the tug of war; the vine crept higher up Daniel's appendage.

It's trying to eat him!

Michael grasped his father's bicep and gave one last yank. His grip slipped and tore his father's shirtsleeve. Michael tumbled backwards striking his head against the bulkhead.

By the time Michael got back to his feet the tendril was already receding back into the water, but not alone. The plant had torn skin, muscle and tendon away from Daniel's arm and was retreating back to its liar with the human feast. Faced with the sight of his father's appendage nearly stripped to the bone with only a few pieces of ragged meat and blood still stuck to it, Michael began to hyperventilate again.

He dropped to his knees and vomited up what little food was left in his stomach. After wiping chunks from the corner of his mouth, survival instinct kicked in and he grabbed the oar. The speed with which he moved surprised even himself, but there was no longer time to worry and contemplate. He had to escape.

Something evil was alive under the serene façade of Lake Vladis. Something that survived by scavenging off the dead, something that had tasted human flesh, and something that Michael did not want coming after him.

He continually paddled left then right, his knees banging against the hull skinning and bleeding. He jumped from side to side; his short arms ached from the effort but continued their quest fueled by pure adrenaline. The shoreline drew closer.

Above his heavy breathing Michael heard a splash and whip like crack. The boat jerked forward throwing Michael face first into the bow. He tried to protect his head by putting up his hands. The consequence of his actions sent the oar into the water. He rolled onto his back to pinpoint the cause of the turbulence.

"No!" he screamed. There were four long plant tentacles now and each one was wrapped around his father, working their way under his skin and attaching to the fleshy muscle.

Michael grabbed the second oar and attempted to paddle but the vines were too strong. The boat merely circled to the right. Frustrated he turned to face the horrid lake creature. The tendril that was secured around his father's neck, the largest of the four, was pulsating, as if sucking out what little fluid was left inside his father's corpse.

Michael franticly searched the hull, looking for anything that could be used as a weapon. His eyes fell upon the second oar and he grabbed the paddle with both hands. Kneeling for support, he drew the heavy oar back like a baseball bat.

It's now or never.

Michael swung at the tentacle that engulfed his father's throat. He struck the plant and heard a muffled shriek arise from somewhere deep under the water. The tendril was partially sliced, spraying a yellowish fluid across the boat. The wounded tentacle recoiled to protect itself and moved with such speed that it ripped Daniel's trachea right out and into the water with its retreat. Daniel Nichols's head was now connected only by the spine and a few last pieces of lacerated skin.

Tasting success, Michael brought the oar back for a second attack, this time aiming for the tentacle that held his father's leg. Before he could land another powerful blow, the oar was ripped from his hands and over his head. He screamed as water cascaded down upon him from a giant moss covered tentacle. This monstrous vine was more than three times the size of the previous feelers and threw the mighty oar as if it were a toothpick.

Michael's hope was destroyed as his last means of escape landed with a splash more than 20 feet away. The massive tentacle crashed down upon the boat forcing Michael to flatten his body against the bottom of the vessel. The vine crept across both edges and passed directly over Michael's trembling face. He held his breath not wanting to give the creature any clues as to his exact location.

He bit down hard on his lips when he saw that the moss-covered appendage had hundreds of tiny suction cups and each cup contained several serrated teeth. Slime and water trailed behind the plant creature as it made its way towards Daniel's abused body. It wrapped itself around his chunky mid section and began to cut into the hardened skin. Michael watched in horror as the suction cups began to work and unseen entrails transferred from his father to the hungry plant.

The only objects left in the boat were the empty cooler and two fishing poles. Neither made a good weapon and Michael had run out of ideas. The shore was maybe thirty feet away, but its appearance was disheartening. For Michael, to be so close to safety and yet so far away, was devastating to his psyche.

"I have to swim," he said, looking at the tentacle that still gorged itself on his father's remains.

Getting in the water where the creature lived was the last thing Michael wanted to do, but there didn't seem to be another option. It was only a matter of time before the tentacles dragged his father to a watery grave and returned to check the boat for any further meals. And if he was still there, he would be joining his father, the dead fish and whatever else the monstrosity had managed to consume throughout its existence.

The third grader gathered all his courage and sat on the bow's edge. He looked down into the abyss and was greeted by his own terrified reflection. Behind him the hungry tendrils worked effortlessly and with minimal sound.

I can't do it.

He looked back at his father. The creature was working fast. The largest tentacle was still fastened to his father's midsection but the smaller vines had stripped away most of the fat and muscle from both legs and his head was completely missing. The sight of his father's headless corpse pushed him to finish the plan.

He slid gently into the water holding onto the boat to minimize ripples. He lowered his body until the water was up to his chest and even then his feet could not feel the bottom. With a final prayer, he pushed away from the boat and cautiously propelled himself forward.

After 15 feet, he felt a rock pass under his shoe. He struggled to find footing. Michael's left shoe grazed more land, and then his right foot received a different kind of pressure. He screamed out loud realizing that something was wrapping around his ankle.

"Help, help!" Michael pushed forward using the new found rocks and ground as support. The more he struggled however, the tighter the creature gripped his leg. Michael felt himself being dragged backwards. He resisted, paddled and screamed but it was no match. The vine pulled him further back from the shore. Soon the lake's floor completely disappeared from under his feet as did his hopes of salvation.

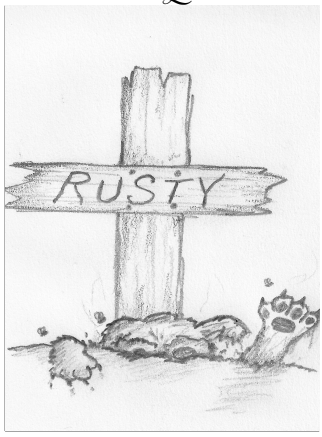
Back in the deeper parts of the lake his journey was no longer backwards, but downwards. The water rose over his chest and chilled his neck. Michael tilted his head back trying to keep his mouth above the water. He sucked in as much oxygen as he could before his face sunk below the icy waters. He looked up through the shimmering surface at a world he would never see again. The vision rolled from side-to-side and distorted from the ripples caused by his head.

The jagged teeth dug into his leg to open the way for the feeding to begin. A yell encased in bubbles escaped his lips and floated up to the surface. Michael was void of air and could feel the tiny mouths sucking the life out of him. He hoped he would die before the tendrils pulled him to the body and mouth of the plant creature. If it was anything like the Venus fly trap, the pain was sure to be excruciating.

Pressure popped his ears, his eyes remained closed and then it happened. He had no choice but to breathe in. He didn't want to, but it was an automatic action, he couldn't control it. Frozen lake water poured into his lungs. It was the weirdest feeling he ever experienced.

'The Thing's Lullaby'

Rick McQuiston



The fierce wind bit into Gerry's face as he blindly made his way towards the back of his property. His ominous destination: the grave of his beloved dog Rusty. The inclement weather was doing its best to hinder every step he took, throwing dirt and various twigs in his face and pushing back at his forward motion. But he continued on; he had to reach the grave.

He knew it might be the only way to stop the nightmares, and hopefully, the incessantly maddening melody which plagued him.

Turning around, Gerry craned his neck slightly, enjoying a slight reprieve from the blistering gale. His house loomed in the distance behind him, seemingly miles away. It was somewhat hidden by many trees, their huge limbs swaying violently back and forth in the wind, but he could still see his new dog (Chipper) in the large window in the back of the house. Chipper had his glossy, black snout pressed against the glass, watching his new owner intently, waiting until his master would come back to the warm, dry home.

Gerry shielded his eyes as best he could. Through the blowing tempest he could just barely see the outline of the wooden cross he'd planted above Rusty's final resting place. It wasn't much, especially considering what a good dog Rusty had been, but he was planning on making a better one when he had a chance.

When the dreams started they were vague at first, but steadily increased in both number and intensity. In them Rusty stood outside Gerry's bedroom window, hardly moving at all, waiting, hoping to be let into the house and be sheltered from the chilly night air.

Gerry would sit up in bed and watch his deceased dog. Part of him wanted to run over to the window and comfort his furry friend, but the realization that his pet was dead slid into his mind and he recoiled back in fear. And then Rusty would start growling and flashing his teeth. His eyes would begin to glow faint red, gradually increasing to a shade so bright that Gerry would have to shield his eyes. The glass windowpane hardly seemed like something strong enough to keep a rabid dog out, but it did.

Rusty could not pass it, regardless of his seemingly supernatural powers.

Gerry would eventually work up enough courage to get up out of bed, but always unsure what to do, would simply stare at his deceased pet in disbelief.

Their eyes would lock with a blank gaze; Rusty's penetrating into Gerry's very soul, corrupting his mind with cold, dark visions of what would happen if he were to gain entry into the house.

Gerry resisted as much as he could, but when the delicate, chilling melody began to seep into his head, he felt himself being drawn toward the window where the corpse of Rusty waited.

He always managed to stave off Rusty in the dreams though, usually waking up in a cold sweat to an empty bedroom. But when the strange melody began invading his waking hours, during work or at home in the evening, he

knew he had to do something. So he followed the inner voice directing him to the far back corner of his yard…Rusty's grave.

The beam from the flashlight was doing its best to cut through the darkness but was losing the battle. Gerry tried to focus the light on the grave, but succeeded only in illuminating a dense wall of mist, which only hinted at the grave hidden within it. But he pushed forward regardless, spurred on by the icy recollection of the terrible dreams and haunting melody which plagued him.

The small mound of turned soil sat in front of him just as it had the day he buried his dog. Rusty's image floated in his mind; barking, chasing his tail, gulping down the wet slop in his food bowl.

Rusty's head split the soil, followed immediately by his front paws. His expression was marred by decay, and Gerry watched horrified as a generous helping of dirt-encrusted worms slid off the dog's face, spilling onto the ground in a writhing mass of disgusting movement. The melody started then as well, ringing in Gerry's ears just like it had in his dreams.

But this time he wasn't dreaming. And it wasn't coming from inside his head. It emanated from another source…one close by.

Very close by.

Forcing himself to pull his gaze away from Rusty, Gerry spun around; attempting to locate just where the melody was coming from, but not seeing anything at all, he whirled back around to face his dead dog.

Rusty was still clawing his way out of his grave, but much more slowly, almost as if he were tiring. He lifted what was left of his snout and let a fractured growl out, greenish spittle dripping from his mouth.

The melody continued to pry into Gerry's mind, peeling back his defenses. It gave no clues as to its origins, humming in the damp night air, teasing with the power it seemingly held over all who heard it.

He frantically searched for a fallen tree branch, anything he could use to fend off Rusty, who was nearly out of his grave.

Soggy and reeking of death, the canine corpse finally pried itself free of its earthly confines, and struggled to reach its former owner. And with a groan of anguish it raised its desiccated head to the night sky and howled in a terrible symphony of death before collapsing into a lifeless heap before its startled onlooker.

Gerry felt relieved, but it was short-lived, for directly behind him, emerging from the bushes, was the architect of the trap.

The thing shambled forward, exposing itself to its prey. It continued rubbing its fangs together, producing the strange melody which captivated the human before it. It was easily capable of overcoming most creatures due to its size and strength, but preferred to secure its meals using its own unique hunting abilities.

Gerry stood frozen, unable to move, unable to escape. He was a sitting duck, an edible statue awaiting his fate.

The thing sprang forward, unable to resist the food before it any longer. And when it had finished its meal it turned its numerous eyes towards the house in the misty night, and to the dog in the window.

'The Promise'

Terence Kuch



"Why Henry," said Alice with a mischievous wink, "you were so cute then. What happened?" Henry frowned. He just hated it when his mother showed the family photo album to every woman who'd lasted more than two dates with him.

"Yes, he was," said Henry's mother, unaware of the byplay across the coffee table. "He hadn't started to put on all that weight." She flipped a page. "Here he is again, Alice. Eight years old, I think." Henry wasn't so cute in this one. In fact, he was having a meltdown. People in the background had turned to look, frown, stare, put on a 'tut-tut' face.

"Mom--," Henry started.

"At the zoo," said Mom. "Remember, Henry? You were so terribly frightened, over nothing, just nothing. We have to show Alice the good *and* the bad, don't we?"

Alice looked at Henry, wondering if he would disagree. But the look of dread on Henry's face -- she'd never seen such a face before -- stopped her cold. What was she seeing in him now? Perhaps Henry had a few flickers of personality after all.

Mom went on obliviously. "I was taking pictures of the ducks there in the zoo, you know they don't keep them locked up they just wander round the lawns and people feed them. Well then, Alice," she glanced in the direction of Henry's latest opportunity to make her a grandmother, "well then, when poor Henry ran back to me, so terrified of something he saw in one of the cages -- kept telling me it wanted to eat him." She smiled at a very agitated Henry. "Of course," I told him, "the lions and tigers do want to eat you, dear, but the nice men here won't let them. -- But did that satisfy Henry?"

Mom looked up expectantly. Apparently this wasn't going to be one of her famous rhetorical questions. Henry shook his head. Since this was about as much answer as she was going to get, Mom took up the conversation again. "Did that satisfy Henry?" she repeated, "No, it did not! He was still yelling and wailing. And so I made him lead me back there, back to that cage." A memory of ancient victories passed over Mom's face. Alice smiled, finally understanding where Henry's habitual silence came from. She began to wonder what other traits Henry might have picked up from living with his mother, and what might be done to cure them.

"And so we got to the cage," Mom continued, "the one Henry pointed out to me and grabbed my skirts and hid his face in them." Henry was turning red. His mouth was fixed in an awkward position normally observed only by his dentist. "And there was nothing there!" Mom was shouting now. "Nothing!" A moment of exultation. "Hadn't been anything in that cage for ages, by the looks of it, but that was thirty years ago so I suppose there might be some kind of animal there now." Mom paused, mentally speculating about what kind of animal might be occupying the cage at that very moment, and what it might be eating.

It suddenly occurred to Alice that she could help Henry, give him a little Therapy. "Take me to the zoo, Henry," she said. "I love the zoo."

"What?" Henry stiffened with alarm.

"This afternoon, they're open till six, I think. We'll have plenty of time."

"Uh, no, I don't think so."

"Come on, they won't eat you!" Alice gave Henry a playful elbow in the ribs, tried to pull him up from the couch. "Not even the lions and tigers."

"You just go on along ahead, children," said Mom, a little dully. "We can finish looking at Henry's old pictures any time. Just any time at all. I'll just stay right here." Her look became doleful. Mom could really lay it on thick, Henry thought, but I'm not going to give in to her, at least not this time, especially not in front of Alice.

"OK, Alice," he said as casually as possible, raising his bulk from the couch. "Let's go to the zoo!" He was already thinking how he could sidetrack Alice and take her somewhere else, anywhere else but the zoo. Study a Civil War statue or see an exhibit of still-life, maybe.

Henry remembered the great beast, how it looked, how it smelled, what it had wanted to do with his eight-year-old self, how hungry it told him it was. How he had been drawn toward its cage, fighting the force that was pulling him in. He begged, beseeched, wailed, and screamed. He promised to do anything, just let me go! His arms and head were drawn through the bars, hung over the empty moat. Anything! And at the last second the beast had relented, extracted a pledge from him, a dark, terrible promise cross my heart. Henry had run back to Mom, bawling, clung to her.

And then he cheated, not keeping his promise; being a coward. He could never go back to the zoo, he thought, or the beast would extract a dreadful vengeance. And so he hadn't gone there, not for thirty years. And now again he'd avoid the beast, deflect Alice from her purpose, change her mind, and make her forget the zoo. Fake an engine breakdown, offer to buy her a pizza or something. Or something.

* * *

Half an hour later, Henry was very reluctantly pulling into the zoo's parking lot, desperately trying to justify staying in the car with the doors locked and the windows up and the radio playing top-twenty louder than his fear.

Alice saw his look. "Now Henry, the only way to get over this --" she almost said 'stupid' -- "this *irrational* fear you have is to go back and look into that cage. Besides," she said brightly, "if there were really some awful monster there thirty years ago, I'm sure it's died or been moved or escaped by now." Henry didn't find that very comforting.

"Come on, Henry!" She teased him, tickled him, poked him, got angry, and dragged him not quite playfully out of the car. They crossed the parking lot, Alice firmly in control of Henry's arm. She paid the entrance fee. Just inside the gate was the inevitable gift shop. "Maybe I'll buy you something on the way out!" Alice said. Henry looked at her. Was she still teasing? What could he possibly want in that damned gift shop? A horrible-monster sweatshirt? A *Jurassic Park Trilogy* highlights DVD, just the scenes where people get eaten?

Alice tossed her head. "I'm going to hang around the shop here, Henry. You go find that old cage, will you? You have to do that by yourself, you know. Do you good. You'll feel a lot better." She walked away. "See you in a while!" she called over her shoulder.

Henry strolled away, elaborately pretending to be calm. He tried to remember where that infernal cage had been. To the left? But in thirty years the zoo had changed. Trees had grown, others had died. There were new buildings. The paths were paved now, not flagstone. And the old signs he remembered, words on arrow-shaped planks, had been replaced with bright cartoon versions of lions, and giraffes, and zebras, and clowns (were *they* in the zoo, too?).

Yes, the dreaded cage must have been over there, to the left, behind that stand of hemlock. Must have been. So Henry turned to the right, strolled past lions and tigers and cheetahs, then a stretch of lawn, and then dromedaries and wart-hogs and okapi. After a few minutes of wandering he'd find Alice, tell her he'd confronted his fears. It would all be over; he would have cheated the beast again, and now cheated Alice, too, by lying to her.

He passed the reptile house without going in, found himself by a long row of old cages. There were black rhinos, and a few animals he couldn't identify, and then several empty cages. Once away from the closeness of animals the zoo felt quiet, cool. The smells of dung and mammal-sweat dissipated. The wind picked up. Henry pulled his jacket a little tighter. Suddenly, with a shock, he found himself in front of the cage he remembered from thirty years before. The same tree-stumps and boulders, the same raw, scarred earth where nothing grew, the same dry, angled moat separating the beast from its public. But this time, the cage was empty.

Henry stared into the cage, trying to be brave. Whatever had been there, it was gone. Escaped, as Alice said? Or perhaps behind him right now, studying him, trying to remember where it had seen him before. Trying to remember the promise Henry had broken.

Henry held his breath, turned around, and then slowly let it out. Nothing but a few scrubby bushes and a small tool shed. He slowed his heaving chest. He had come back, survived. What had he been afraid of all those years, anyway? There was no great beast; never had been. Or if there had, it was long gone. Breathing more steadily now, he thought to turn back to the cage, stare into it for -- how long? -- three minutes, he swore to himself; then he'd find Alice and go home in triumph. But now, just as he turned -- there it was, gliding in slowly through a door in the back of the cage: the beast, just as he remembered it. Henry felt his heart stop. He tried to be very quiet. Perhaps it hadn't noticed him. He

stared at it, wishing it away, wanting to pinch himself as if that would wake him, but not daring to move.

At first glance it could have passed for a large black stone, a rough-hewn monolith. But its outline was vague, blurred, as if there were no clear line between where it was and where it was not; between where it had been and where it would be. Its eyes -- a circle of pale unblinking eyes seemed to glow with their own light. And in the midst of the circle, a mouth?

No, not quite a mouth, but a hole, as black as darkness visible, inside a rim of red and moistened lips. Yes, Henry thought, this was what he'd seen thirty years before. But there was more. Terribly more.

One thin arm-like tentacle emerged from the shape, waved in the idle air; and then a second and a third. A few birds fluttered by, dipped down to observe the sinuous shapes, went on about their doings. But then a crow, thinking perhaps that the tentacles might be good to eat, landed on top the cage, moved in between the bars, cocked its head twice, decided to investigate further.

The arms weaved a pattern, a kind of speech. The crow dropped from the bars, flew closer. The arms reached out, grasped the crow gently, caressed it, and touched its wings, its head. The crow seemed pleased, lulled. The arms probed the crow's eyes, pulled them out. The crow shrieked. One by one, the arms pulled the bones from the crow's body, drew them toward its black hole, past the lips. Within a few minutes, as Henry watched horrified, there was nothing left of the crow but its blind head, its beak slowly opening and closing, its feathers and lungs, still shrieking. The beast drew these, too, into itself.

Henry remembered, waited for what he knew would come next.

The arms weaved more patterns. Henry understood. The beast was pleased that Henry had remembered his promise. It didn't seem to mind that thirty years had passed. It was grateful for what would come next.

* * *

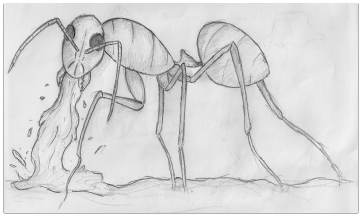
Running! Stumbling back, gasping for breath, crying out, weeping, his whole body shaking, Henry burst running from the row of cages, straining to find the comforting figure.

There she was, smiling down at him, snapping a picture of him in his distress but Henry was too far gone to be embarrassed. He looked up at her, tried to tell Mom in sobs of broken phrases that he had met a horrible monster that wanted to eat him, that he had told it how small he was, that if the beast let him go he'd promised to come back with someone larger, with more meat, more fat, more blood to feed that endless black hole of a mouth, cross my heart and hope to die.

Mom didn't seem to be listening. In the distance, from the direction of the cage, eight-year-old Henry heard the screams of a man being drawn into the final darkness, consumed, devoured.

'The Third Floor'

William Pauley III



It came from the third floor.

The sound echoed through the hallways and down each of the staircases before tearing into my ear canal like a fucking razor. I tell you, it was a scream! A scream followed by the ripping thunder of a chainsaw furiously rumbling to life. I snorted a line of red fire ants; a nasty habit I plan to quit, believe you me. The ants crawled around in my brain, awaking my senses. From each of their fangs leaked electric venom.

I grabbed my shotgun.

Quickly, I walked up the staircase, tripping up a time or two. Those goddamn fire ants, they always get the best of me. The closer I got, the louder the noise became. Several of the tenants opened their doors as I passed by. Before they spoke, I held a finger to my lips, signaling for them to keep quiet, then continued my trek down the halls.

When I finally reached the third floor, I hoisted my shotgun and leaned one shoulder against the wall, just as I was trained in my younger days in the Army. All of the rooms on the third floor were vacant, except for one. From that one room, came the sound.

I balled up my fist and banged twice on the door, keeping my sights on the peephole. The chainsaw noise stopped. The screaming stopped. Suddenly, there was silence.

A shadow manifested before the peephole and quickly disappeared.

I then beat my fist against the pale oak door a third and fourth time. Still, there was silence.

"Now, look here, folks! There are people here trying to sleep!" I said, followed by more silence.

"Now, if I have to come up here anymore, then I'm gonna knock down this goddamn door and pull ya out by your earlobes!"

Silence still.

"You hear me?!"

Silence.

"Well, alright then."

I lowered my shotgun and walked back downstairs. The other tenants all watched as I trudged down the hallways. I just waved them off, shooing them back into their rooms. I just needed some sleep and goddamn it if I was gonna stay up all night answering their questions. I haven't been sleeping so well lately. Not with all this noise around here.

Before climbing into bed, I went into the kitchen and filled a glass with water. I then hugged the sides of my icebox, heaved, and moved it out about two feet to the left. Three large brown cockroaches panicked at the light and anxiously sought refuge. I was able to pin one of them down against the floor with my index finger. I pinched the pest between my fingers and pushed it to my lips. I wrapped my tongue around its squirming body to hold it in place while I went back for the glass of water. I hate the taste of a filthy cockroach. I can never manage to swallow one without having something to wash it down with. There is just something in their fat bodies that always makes me feel tired. It's like that chemical found in turkey meat that is supposed to make you feel sleepy or something. Whatever it is, it works. I hadn't had a good night's sleep in nearly a month. I needed it. I bit the little fucker in two and downed the entire glass of water. I picked parts of its legs from my teeth until I finally fell asleep.

* * *

I was awakened shortly after, or so I thought, turns out I'd slept for two entire days. A drop of water landed right, square between my eyes and pooled around my left socket. It brought me screaming back into consciousness. I wiped the water from my eye and looked up at the ceiling; the entire span of it was completely soaked and had already started growing rings of mold. I immediately leapt from my bed, discovering that the carpet was buried beneath two inches of cold water. The mail slot in my door was crammed full of white envelopes; some of it was mail, most of it was complaints about the water leaking into and destroying their apartments. All of them claimed the water was coming from the third floor. It was then that I had suspected that I had slept a little longer than I had originally intended.

Again, I grabbed the shotgun and angrily stomped out of my apartment. I lost my slippers in the ocean somewhere between my front door and the first staircase.

When I finally got all the way up to the staircase that leads to the third floor, a waterfall was pouring down from above. I pulled the nightcap off of my head and pitched it angrily at the pool of water below.

Now, I ain't gonna lie, at that moment I felt like killin' a man. Maybe that is the easiest way to explain my participation in the unfortunate events that followed.

* * *

Once I was up on that third floor, I knew right away that something was a foul. The oak door that had been on those hinges just two days before was replaced with a large steel door, the kind found on goddamn submarines! You could imagine my anger when I first noticed this, being the building superintendant and all. I tried to remember if any of the letters that was stuffed in my mail slot had anything to do with a large metal door, I was certain there wasn't.

I pounded my fist against that steel door and was surprised to hear that there was no sound. I beat my fist against the door again, still no sound. It was as if the whole goddamn room was solid metal!

My anger got the best of me as I kicked in the door of the neighboring apartment. The room was empty, as I mentioned before, all the rooms on the third floor were vacant except for the one causing all of this ruckus. I took aim with my shotgun at the wall shared by the two flats and blasted a hole about two feet in diameter.

Much to my surprise, I was knocked flat on my ass by a 500-gallon water-blast that shot out from the mouth I had just blown through the wall. Half of the room filled with freezing-cold water in an instant. My feet finally found the floor. I rose up out of the abyss, the water was now as high as my chest. I threw up my shotgun to aim it for the terror I was about to see standing in Room #303.

* * *

There is nothing in life that can prepare a man for what I saw that day. No sir, nothing t'all. I remember my first thought was that I was dreaming. *Ain't no way in hell this thing is real*, I thought. I pinched my arms and bruised like a banana, I did! I tell you, this thing was real! Standing before me, nearly taking up half of the entire span of Room #303, was the biggest mother fucking carpenter ant I had ever seen.

Without even realizing, I lowered my gun.

"What in the hell are you?" I asked it. It didn't speak. Instead, it gargled and coughed up bucket-loads of water.

"Goddamn it! We were almost there!" I heard a woman say. She stepped out into view, took off her scuba gear and threw her plastic goggles toward my face. I ducked. She was quite stunning. Blonde hair, blue eyes. *The works.* "What the hell, man?! Have you ever heard of knocking?"

"Excuse me, ma'am… but, just what the hell is that?" I couldn't get my mind off of the giant puking insect.

"*That* is my fiancé. Who the hell are you? Elmer-fucking-Fudd?" She was making fun of my shiny bald head and my shotgun, I'm sure of it.

"Fiancé?! Honey, that there is the biggest goddamn demon insect there ever was. Surely, you can see that thing standing next to you?!"

Her eyes lowered."Well, he wasn't always this way…" She said, somewhat sadly.

"Oh? Well, just what the hell was he then? A rattlesnake? A… a… a goddamn sperm whale?!" I said as I chuckled.

"Oh, he's been lots of things…" she said, without any emotion, staring at the ground. She lifted her eyes up at the fifteen-foot creature that stood next to her, "but he started out human, just like you. Just like me."

I dropped my sarcasm. "What do you mean… 'started out human'?"

The woman stared at me for a few seconds before turning back to her lover, the six-legged freak. She looked at him as if she was silently asking permission. The freak cocked his head in approval. She turned back to me.

"He is… *cursed*. You see, I know this is going to sound pretty unbelievable, but Teddy… that's his name, Teddy…" she said, now holding one of the creatures filthy armored limbs in her tiny perfect little pink hands, "Teddy and I went to Japan on holiday. We made plans to get married. We even had plans to go back to our hotel room afterwards and conceive our first child. But then we made that awful decision… it ruined everything."

"What awful decision?" I said, taking it all in.

"Super Happy Fun Time."

"Super Happy Fun Time?"

"Super Happy Fun Time… it's a Japanese game show. We went just as members of the audience, but Teddy's name was randomly picked to be a contestant. "

"So, what? Did you lose a bunch of money or something?"

She didn't speak a word, instead she just pointed her finger to the transformed Teddy.

"They turned him into an insect?" I asked.

"No, no, no… they first turned him into a panda. He didn't reach the insect level until much later."

"Insect level? I'm sorry, I'm not following you…"

"They cursed Teddy to live life as each and every creature on Earth. Insects are his final stage. We have something like two-hundred species left before Teddy is human again."

I kept a straight face for as long as I possibly could, before eventually bursting into laughter. It was obvious they took offense.

"You never answered me, old man – Who the hell are you anyway?" she said, her anger returning.

"I'm your landlord." I answered, "I came up here to try and figure out just why the hell the building is sinking. Water is everywhere! It's at least knee deep down on the first floor. Now, I know it wasn't like this when I went to sleep, so I came up here to get some answers."

She stood there quietly like a scolded child.

"So…?" I nudged.

"Well… I was trying to kill Teddy." She said, dryly.

My eyes glowed."You were trying to *kill* your fiancé?"

"Well, yeah. I have to. If I don't kill him, then he will live the lifespan of all of the creatures he must replicate. I can't wait that long. I've been killing Teddy for about three years now. I'd say in another a month, we're in the clear. Teddy will be back and we'll have our 500 million dollars. Teddy says that we're going to buy an island with that money! We're finally going to be able to live the good life!" She smiles and kisses Teddy's twitching leg. "We've worked so hard for this."

"Okay, so let me see if I understand this correctly, you replaced your wooden door with an airtight steel door so that you could fill the room up with water and drown him?"

The woman nods.

"Wouldn't it just be easier to blow his goddamn brains out with a shotgun every time?"

"Well, there are two problems with that…One – Teddy doesn't like to die in ways in which he has to suffer. He prefers painless, instant death. Two – Super Happy Fun Time requires that we kill Teddy differently each time, so that the viewers don't get bored and change the channel."

"Viewers?!"

The woman points to a camera mounted in the corner of the room. "Oh yes, we have to keep it on us at all times, or else we don't get our cash prize."

I looked up at the camera. The device hummed and whirred as the lens zoomed in close on my face.

"I want in on this..." I said.

"What? Why?" she asked.

"I want me a piece of that money pie, that's why!"

"No, no, no, no, no… we've come so far already. We don't need your help! Why should we waste any of our prize money on you?"

"Hmm… well, you *have* done quite a bit of damage to this building, wouldn't you say?" I said, eyeing the blood spattered walls and the waist-deep gulf covering the floor. She looks around, noticeably nervous. "I'd hate to have to keep your damage deposit as the consequence." I said, slyly.

She gulps and takes a quick glance at Teddy, "No… we wouldn't want *that*. Surely, we can work something out here."

"Ah, good! Now that's exactly what I was wantin' to hear! So, shall we continue?"

"Continue what?" she asked.

"Continue killin' Teddy?"

Her eyes perked up and she smiled. "Great! Just let me get my goggles."

"No, no… you just wait. If we're gonna do this, then we are gonna do it the right way, *the easy way*!"

I grabbed a plastic trash bag and a roll of duct tape from one of the cabinets. I filled the bag with water and taped the bag around Teddy's head. Teddy was dead seven minutes later.

"See, he still drowned, the audience still gets their entertainment and there is less to clean up afterwards! This killin' thing ain't too hard, you just gotta use your noggin'."

"Wait! Look! He's changing!"she screamed excitedly.

She was right. Teddy's body was changing right before our very eyes. Bones popped and shifted. A new layer of insect shell jutted out from each of his joints and covered the previous armor. Soon there was this whole new thing livin' and breathin' right before our very eyes. This time, Teddy was an ear wig.

* * *

We continued to play this morbid game for somethin' like three weeks. Teddy turned into every insect you could possibly imagine. Some as a giant, but mostly in their natural smallish forms.

For the most part it was a cakewalk. The smaller bugs we were able to kill with household items, like cleaning solvents and rolling pins.

The larger ones took a little thought to pull off. Once, Teddy turned into a giant moth and escaped through the kitchen window while we were thinkin' of a new, exciting way to kill my new friend. I grabbed the camera and chased Teddy through the city, scaring the livin' hell outta all the people out in the streets. Luckily for us, Teddy fell in love with the giant neon sign that stood just outside of *Wild Bill's Gentleman's Club*. The little lady and I enjoyed a couple beers and a great show, while Teddy sat perched on that sign until his insides were fried from the intense heat. I knew it was time to go home when the joint started to reek of what smelled like burnt popcorn.

* * *

When the day finally came, the day that Teddy became his last creature, we were all too excited that none of us could think straight. We all three had dollar signs in our eyes. Plus, we done killed ol' Teddy just about every goddamn way you can kill an insect. There just wasn't anything left to do. I'm sure there were millions in Japan laughing at our dumbasses that day as we all sat slack-jawed and silent.

Then I got the itch. It had been a few days since I had had any good shit. I looked over at Teddy, now a water bug, resting gently in his loving fiancé's palm.

"I've got it… here, let me have him!" I said, as I took poor ol' Teddy and pinched him between my left index finger and thumb, to keep him from squirming. I looked down at Teddy and whispered, "I'll be seeing ya, buddy!" then jammed Teddy's crispy torso up into my left nostril and snorted. I felt Teddy squirm as he made his way down my nasal cavity, nearly escaping from my mouth, and finally dissolving in the stomach acids that gurgled below.

Much to my surprise, Blondie wasn't jumping for joy like I initially thought she would be. Instead, she was balled up on the recliner crying her eyes out.

"Hey, hey now… what is all of this, huh? I thought you'd be happy! Come on! Teddy will be here any minute… when do we get our money?"

All of a sudden, her crying had stopped and had evolved into deep and hysterical laughter.

"Ho, ho, ho, ho! You really think you're slick, huh, Mr. Randrord!" she said, her voice was now much lower and she seemed to be speaking in some sort of strange accent that she never had before.

She turned to look at me. She raised her hands up slowly to either side of her face. She quickly dug her fingers into her throat and yanked off a mask, revealing the face of a smallish Japanese man.

"Ho, ho, ho… Mr. Randrord! Smire for camera! You are on *Super Happy Fun Hour*! I do berieve you know the rules, correct?"

I didn't answer. I was in shock. He continued.

"The organism you just ingested contains the chemical Cramorhorozide which crevery rewrites your DNA. You are the new Teddy! Ho, ho! We will give you one year to comprete course! If you succeed, then the cash is yours! Goodbye, Mr. Randrord… and good ruck!"

And then he was gone.

Now that you know my situation… what do you say, huh? You wanna piece of the cash pie?! Good! Now, go grab that shovel…

'Butter Flower'

A.J. Brown



"Look at those flowers. They're so beautiful," Trey said to Rachel as they exited the woods into an open field. It was the second day of a week-long hiking trip the two had planned a year in advance. They got off to a good start the day before with finding the RV Park and securing a spot for the van. Shortly after lunch they went hiking, stopping at dusk to pitch a tent and start a small fire. Morning came and they woke to birds chirping. Refreshed from the night of rest they continued through the woods--an easy hike with an old pathway worn through it by other people.

A lavish green field lay before them. Giant flowers filled the landscape, their colors of red, yellow, pink, brown, orange and purple blending together in a cacophony of swirls and patterns, as if they were hundreds of large butterflies lying together.

"Get the camera, Rachel. We're going to want pictures of this."

Rachel dropped her pack from her shoulders and unzipped the top flap. Her camera sat on top. She grabbed it

and flipped the flap shut. She switched the camera on, waited for the light to turn green. Rachel nodded, raised the camera to her eye and clicked off several photos.

"Come on," she said. "I want to get some close ups."

Rachel slung her pack over her shoulder and walked to the edge of the field of flowers.

"I've never seen plants like this before," she said and set her pack down. Reaching out to one of the waist high flowers, she stroked a yellow, brown and red petal that was the size of a man's hand. The leaf curled and closed.

"Did you see that?" Rachel asked.

"No. What happened?"

"Watch." Rachel ran a finger along another large petal. Like the first one, it curled into a tube.

"The flowers are sensitive," Trey said.

"It looks that way, doesn't it?" she responded and raised the camera. She took a picture of the petal. Rachel brushed her way into the field, petals shrinking away as she touched them. As she took snap shots of the various colored plants she commented on their beauty and the intricate patterns on each one.

"Maybe we should stay outside the plants. We don't know what could be in there," Trey said, his nerves dancing along his skin, an uneasy tightness gripping at his chest.

"Don't be a wuss, Honey," she said and disappeared further into the flowers.

Trey let out a deep breath, shrugged and followed her, trying not to brush into as many plants as Rachel did. Many of them had already curled up, as if it were a defense mechanism.

"Rachel, I think we should get on out of here. There's something wrong with this place."

"They're just flowers, Trey," she said. "We may have discovered something no one has ever seen before. We need pictures."

Trey, kept his head on a swivel, constantly glancing around for anything that could be dangerous. He didn't see Rachel stop and bumped into her.

"Why are you stopping?"

"Look," Rachel said and pointed to a flower unlike any of the others. Large leaves hung off a thick stem, its bud the size of a watermelon, a bright orange and still closed.

"Wow," Trey said and stepped past Rachel and touched one of its large petals. The flower shivered and opened.

"Rachel, do you see this?"

She leaned in closer to the flower. "Oh, my."

The center where the carpal should have been sat a clear, round sack. Red veins grew on its exterior. A baby lay in the center of the sack, curled up in the fetal position, its eyes closed; hands balled into tiny fists; legs crossed one over the other.

Rachel raised her camera and took a picture. The baby snapped its head in her direction. Its eyes opened, revealing bright yellow irises. Its mouth sprung open, tiny teeth gnashing at the inside of the sack as if it were trying to get out.

Rachel screamed and backed away, her hands trembling. "Let's get out of here."

"What?"

"We need to get out of here… Now. We shouldn't be here."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you all along."

Rachel rolled her eyes and pushed by Trey. "Let's just go, okay?"

"Okay. We can follow the path of curled plants and -" Trey's words trailed off, his eyes grew large. He looked past Rachel and she turned her head.

Rachel screamed, but it ended abruptly. Her eyes filled with tears as a claw from what looked like a human butterfly extended out and sunk its talons into her chest. Blood spattered its yellow skin and brightly colored wings. The

creature hummed and blood spilled from Rachel's ears and nose. Her eyes ruptured.

Trey dropped to the ground, his head buzzing, eyes bulging and ears ringing. He struggled to his feet and ran back through the flowers; petals shrank away as he tore through them, no longer careful of them. He held his ears, trying to block out the shrill whistle blowing through his head. Part of him told him to go back and help his wife. The other part—the survivor in him—yelled for him to run like hell. The survivor won out and he continued through the field of flowers until a shadow loomed above him. Trey looked up and then dove to the ground. The odd looking butterfly man swooped down, missing him with its talons.

Trey lay on the ground, his heart drumming, tears trailing down his face. He listened for anything: flapping wings from the oversized butterfly, plants rustling, his own breathing, and Rachel's screams. He heard none of these, only the high pitch whistle piercing both ears.

Through the pain tearing at his skull he forced himself to think. *I've got to get out of here.*

Trey, crawled forward on soft grass, trying not to bump thick stems or rustle the flowers that hid him from the creature.

He looked over his shoulder and from side to side as he inched along. The flowers rustled all around him and he tried to move faster, but staying low to the ground made it difficult.

"Shit!" he yelled when his hand sunk into the corpse in front of him. The man's skin was parchment dry, his stomach split open and light green leaves and wilted petals lay inside the wound. Trey crept around the man, and continued forward. Bodies lay strewn about beneath the flowers, stems growing out of them. Many of the corpses looked like they had been dead for years.

Trey turned, pushed beneath the flowers, his shoulders touching several of them. They curled and folded in at his touch. His breaths came in hitches bringing moans

of fear with them. The moans gave way to a scream at the sight of Rachel's lifeless eyes staring at him. Her body lay on the ground in front of him, tiny roots penetrating through the skin of her throat. Further down, stems grew out of her body in various places. Her chest was torn open and a bud had already taken form within the open cavity. "I'm so sorry, Rachel," he cried.

He reached forward, touched her hand and then brushed by her.

From above him, two claw-like feet latched onto Trey's arm, snatching him up and out of the plants with a sudden jerk. Trey's shoulder popped out of the socket and he screamed as pain raced into his neck and back and down his arm.

The butterfly man looked down, its mouth open and tongue lulling to one side.

"No," Trey yelled.

The talons released, dropping him to the ground near the opposite side of the field that he and Rachel had entered from. Trey landed with a thud. Bones popped, cracked and snapped in his legs, hips and back. Pain swallowed him and he blacked out for a few seconds.

Trey snapped awake to sharp pains, like hundreds of needles poking bare skin. His eyes fluttered, opened. He blinked several times to clear the haze in his head. Focusing, he stared into several tiny sets of eyes looking back at him. They were set on faces that held large mouths with tiny sharp teeth in them. Dull colored wings adorned their backs. Several of them chewed on Trey's broken body. One of them hopped onto his chest, its talons sinking into the soft skin. It leaned forward, cocked its head to one side and sank its teeth into one of his cheeks.

Trey, tried to scream but nothing came out.

Several of the little creatures bounced along his body, surrounded his head and bit him, ripping skin, tissue and hair off of his face and skull.

* * *

Night fell and a baby butterfly creature emerged from the embryonic sack that surrounded it. Small fingers ripped through the clear membrane, pulling it down around its head. It jerked its head from side to side, its bright yellow eyes blinking. Two wings, soaked from the fluids of the sack were pinned to its backside. It cried.

Two yellow arms reached into the large flower and lifted the baby from the shelter of its petals. The father held it to his chest and kissed its bald head. He lowered it to Trey's body, to the hole in his chest, and sat it down.

The baby leaned forward, dipping its head into the red pool surrounding it. When it came up blood covered its head and chest and there was fresh meat in its mouth.

As the baby fed for the first time, its parents watched proudly.

'So that's How the Cookie Crumbled'

A.E. Churchyard



Jamie's black cat slipped into the kitchen as Jamie searched through the cupboards. "Meow." She dropped a tiny furry corpse at Jamie's feet.

"I'm sure that there's something around here that I can eat. Pity, I burnt the last of the bread." he glanced down at the cat and shook his head, "Sniffles, I am not going to eat that mouse, however nice it tastes to you."

Jamie crouched down and began to rummage through the cupboards by the fridge.

"Prrrruuurp?" Sniffles bumped her head against his thigh.

"No, I am not going to play with you." he scrabbled around at the back of the big cupboard, behind the cereal. "Aha! What's this? Looks like biscuits."

He brought it out into the light, the rich purple and silver packaging throwing light onto the cupboards.

"Grrr….Miawwaaah!" Sniffles backed away, her hackles up.

"Sniffles, what's wrong? It's just a packet of biscuits." Jamie waved it under her nose. She took off as if her tail had caught fire, straight through the cat flap.

"Daft flumpcat!" Jamie muttered as he made himself a cup of tea. "Oh well, I'll munch my way through these. They *look* like a cross between Jaffa Cakes and Oreos."

He carried the tea and biscuits through to the lounge, putting them onto the coffee table. Then he went hunting for the TV remote. The packet rustled slightly, as if the biscuits inside were jockeying for space.

Jamie flipped the TV on and settled on a re-run of Torchwood, before easing himself onto the leather couch and opening his find.

"These are nice biscuits, the chocolate layer is just right and the shortcake bit…" he munched his way quickly through one, closing his eyes with pleasure.

He sipped his tea and picked up another biscuit "Hey! They hold up even when you dunk them!"

The packet rustled again, but Jamie was too intent on watching Eve Myles run down a street in tight jeans and a leather jacket to notice. He reached out for another. The cat flap banged and Sniffles wandered into the lounge.

"Hi Sniffles. The cream in the middle of these biscuits is divine, I have got to find out where mum got them – it tastes just like whipped vanilla cream!" Jamie licked the centre of the biscuit clean and dunked the shortcake in his tea again.

The cat jumped up onto the glass topped table and started to drag the packet away from him.

"Hey, those are mine! Go catch yourself another mouse, you stupid cat!"

As he got up to shoo the cat away, Sniffles hissed at him and ran out the flap again. Jamie sighed, retrieved the packet and stuffed another biscuit into his mouth.

The phone rang as he sat down.

"Hi mum. Why didn't you wait for me? Oh. Sorry. Yes I found something, I love these new biscuits!" He took a

bite out of the biscuit. "Very funny, mum. *What biscuits?* I know you hide all the nice stuff from me but, come on! I'll see you later." he put the phone on the table.

"Mmm., this is the last one." He finished the biscuit, emptied his mug and looked at the vacant packet.

"I wish that I knew where they came from, I'd go and buy some more… Huh. Why is my stomach so distended?"

Jamie ran his hand over his throbbing tummy, frowning at the way it seemed to shift and roll under his palm. "Urgh. I feel like I'm going to throw up…" He dropped off the couch and landed on all fours, pushing the coffee table to one side."…oh, my stomach hurts."

His abdomen really was moving now; Jamie moaned as something rolled over under his skin. It wriggled from his stomach into his guts and he clutched at it with one hand, trying to stop the motion.

With his other hand he grabbed the phone and just about managed to dial 999. "Hello? My stomach hurts and I'm going to throw up, can you help?"

"Name and address please."

"James Jones, 24 Heol y Geraint, Rhoose Point." He gasped out as the thing in his guts rotated, setting his stomach on fire and making him retch.

"Are you drunk James?"

"No I'm not drunk! I ate some new biscuits and my stomach is all swollen." A wet spot appeared on his Bluebirds shirt, rapidly widening, "Please help me, there is something moving around inside me… it feels like it's going to…burst!"

Jamie dropped the phone, rolled over onto his back and watched as the wet spot became a hole. Something reached up over the edge, making him feel like he was being eaten from the inside out, as a white, wormlike creature began to emerge.

Absorbing his shirt, it grew fatter, slipping down the waistband of his jeans. The last thing that he remembered was pure, unadulterated agony.

"*Hello, James? Are you still there? Can you hear me? Pete, get a patrol car and a First Responder over there, I'll stay on the line. No, I can't hear the caller, just a gushing, gloopy kind of noise. James? Can you hear me? Someone is coming now, hang on!*"

* * *

Gavin peered through the frosted glass of the front door, wondering what the hideous smell was. It hung in the warm September air making him wish for a breeze to blow it away.

"Who are you?" The voice made him jump and he spun his heart racing. He breathed a sigh of relief as he realised it was a Police Officer.

"Gavin Beynon. I'm the duty First Responder; there was a 999 call from here"

"PC Pendry. I was called out by the Emergency Call Centre." Pendry looked into the front window, wrinkling his nose "What's that reek? I can't see anything through the curtains."

"I don't know. Should we break down the door? The patient could be dying in there."

Pendry nodded, "That's procedure – I'll call it in first and get the Station to track down the owners of the house."

"I'll take a quick look through that side window… woah! Something moved in there." Gavin returned to the door quickly.

"Ok then Serge…" Pendry turned to Gavin, "Right, I have authorisation to break in. There's another car and an ambulance coming."

Gavin looked distinctly unnerved by the prospect of breaking and entering, however legal.

"Looks like a sturdy door. Gimme a second, I'll get the rammer out of the car." Pendry wandered back to his patrol car.

"I think it's deadlocked. I can hear something moving in there and that smell is getting stronger." Gavin called to the PC.

"It's like Cheese, a really bad, pongy Camembert that's gone off. Here's the Rammer, stand back." Pendry hefted the solid, red metal bar by its handles.

It took three thumps to splinter the wood around the lock and push the door back against the left hand wall.

"Pfffw! I would have said nine week old milk." Gavin started to push past him but Pendry held him back, dropping the Rammer onto the front lawn.

"Let me go first, this is starting to look rather dodgy." He pulled out the nightstick that was his only weapon and paced forward slowly.

Gavin followed closely behind carrying his medi-kit. "That smell is getting stronger… I can hear the Call Operative still talking." They came to the end of the short hall and looked into the lounge. Gavin bumped into Pendry's broad back. "Why did you stop moving?"

"Oh…my…God… what the hell is that?" Pendry whispered.

Gavin peered round him, "I've no idea but, it looks like it's feeding off the boy on the floor!" he felt sick. A huge brown and white mass covered the boy's legs; it seemed to be sucking at him. The phone lay over by the TV, the Call-op's voice squeaking through it.

The two men backed into the hallway again. They discussed what they could do in low voices and were about to try and see if the boy was still alive when the slurping, sucking noise that the creature made stopped, to be replaced by a sliding, slick noise instead.

Pendry risked a glance into the lounge "It's oozing this way. Let's get out of here!"

They dashed for the front door, Gavin throwing himself out of the way as PC Pendry attempted to pull the door shut. He managed it but where the rammer had punched a hole in the edge, the creature began to ooze

through onto Pendry's hand. "It's faster than I thought it was!"

"Fucking hell, it's eating Pendry *and* the door!" Gavin stumbled backward as the thing crept over Pendry's body, swelling and growing.

He dashed for his car, yanking the door shut behind himself. "Control, this is a serious emergency! There is some kind of…" A sudden sweet, metallic odour overpowered his voice and Gavin gagged as the globulous creature covered the side of the car, red veins pulsing through the brown and white mess against the window, "… thing. It's eating the rubber seal around the door! Control! Call the…Argh!"

The Blob slid down the inside of the door and dropped onto Gavin's thigh and right arm. He screamed, feeling fire and ice crawling through his flesh, moving steadily upward, the agony expanding as the amorphous mass filled the car, easing its way up his body, sucking blood and flesh into itself with equal fervour. Just before he fainted from pain, he heard Control's voice. "Gavin? What's going on? Gavin?"

* * *

"What's going on Michael? Why are you slowing down?"

"There's a roadblock by the airport roundabout." He pulled to a stop behind a truck.

"We can't get home? What about Jamie?" Neala couldn't imagine leaving her son by himself all night.

"He's a big boy Neala, he's nearly twenty you know." Michael shook his head, sure that it was his wife's fault that their son hadn't left home yet.

"What do we do then?" her voice was beginning to rise and he could feel his temper mounting with it.

"Why don't you call him? Ask him if he knows what's going on." He suggested, trying hard to stay calm.

"Hang on, there's a cop coming over. Is the car ok?"

"Yes! I only had it MOT'd last month!" he snapped, "Shh! Can I help you officer?"

"Are you Michael Jones?" the policeman leaned down to the silver Aston Martin's window, pushing the face of his motorbike helmet up.

"I am. What on earth is going on?"

"I'm sorry Mr. Jones, you and your wife need to come to the airport with me."

Neala gasped, whispering "Not Jamie. Please not Jamie."

Michael pulled out behind the Motorbike and swallowed against a sudden tightness in his chest.

"My name is Inspector Klary and I'm in charge of the police operation here. Do you live at number 24 Heol y Geraint, Rhoose Point?" the policewoman seemed incredibly young to Michael as he sat down beside his wife.

"That's right Officer. Is my son James here? We left him at home this evening."

"His name *was* James then? We received a 999 call from your house at 10:05pm this evening."

Michael's chest contracted painfully; Neala gasped, panic making her voice as breathless as he felt. "What do you mean *was* James? A 999 call? What is going on?"

"Calm down Neala." Michael slipped an arm around her," Was James hurt?"

"I'm afraid so. We have his remains in a private room." Inspector Klary's face looked sick before she cleared her expression. Michael wondered if it was the first time she'd seen…what, what had she seen?

"Remains? What has happened to my Son? What have you done to him!" his wife all but threw herself across the table at the woman, her face white with fear; Michael pulled her back.

Klary waited with an impassive face until Michael had calmed his wife.

"I will tell you what's happened once you have identified the body."

"Identified?" Michael realised that something serious *had* happened. He had visions of fire raging through the house, James being trapped inside and unable to escape. Neala's chair slipped and he grabbed her reflexively as she slid down against him. "Damn, she fainted."

"One of my colleagues will look after her Mr. Jones. If you'll just come with me…"

Michael steeled himself and followed Inspector Klary.

She took him to a refrigerated room with three covered bodies and removed the sheet from the first one's face

"Yes that's James. Why won't you show me his body?" He ran one hand softly down his son's face, brushing the blond hair out of James' eyes in a gesture that he had used every night until James was twelve. "Oh Jamie, what happened to you?" he whispered as he pulled his hand away.

"Just procedure Mr. Jones, I'll take you back to Mrs. Jones now." A sweet sickly odour rose from under the sheet as Klary covered James over again. It reminded Michael of cookie dough ice-cream overlaid with a metallic tang.

He blinked away tears, "Thanks…" Michael wasn't sure if he really wanted to talk to Neala now.

* * *

Private Ingalls stood on the roof of the substation next to the level crossing. Overhead the noise of the Police Helicopter echoed around the houses. With his night vision goggles, Ingalls could see the mass of the creature rolling across gardens, leaving behind bare earth. At one point it crossed to the fields atop the cliffs and slowed down. Ingalls chuckled as he saw the reason why.

"Why on earth are you laughing Ingalls?" Corporal Jamieson called up to him from his position beside the substation.

"It's coming this way Corporal, but it's slowed down to raid the wildlife in the fields on the cliffs. You should be able to see some of the exodus coming over the tracks now."

A flood of animals streamed across the railway, spilling off along the tracks and into nearby gardens. Ingalls looked up at the Helicopter and saw that it was having a hard time avoiding bird strike as an equivalent flock of birds of all sizes took to the air.

"*Thank you,* Private Ingalls." Jamieson rolled his eyes and turned to his communications man, "Ward! Have we any news about how to kill this thing?"

"Nothing from HQ Corporal."

"How about freezing it? That's what worked in *The Blob*…" Ingalls called down.

"What, the Steve McQueen one?" Jamieson racked his brain trying to remember the B movie he had watched from behind the sofa as a ten year old. "Where is the creature now?"

"Yup, they used Fire Extinguishers. Maybe Liquid Nitrogen would do it?" Ingalls replied as he looked down at the meadows, "It's nearly to the mini roundabout."

"Excellent suggestion Ingalls, Ward get on the radio and ask about it."

"Ok Corp… They say that someone else came up with the same idea. A tanker is on its way from St Athan now. We have to get it up onto the runway so that it freezes all the way round." Ward reported after a consulting Command.

"Thank you Ingalls, any ideas how?"

"Corporal Jamieson. Your patrol is to lure the Blob to the Runway. Use organics to lure it. Sergeant Booth's patrol is following behind with flame throwers in an attempt to stop it from diverging. Good luck." A voice said over the radio.

"Well that solves *that* question. Ingalls, with me, Smith, raid those houses over there and bring back *anything* organic to lure the creature with. We've got a fair way to go to get to the Airport from down here."

* * *

"Where did that thing come from? Why did it kill my Son?" Neala cried as they watched footage taken by the police helicopter. She still couldn't believe that her darling son was dead.

"We believe that the creature was created from something James had eaten recently." Inspector Klary replied.

Neala gasped "He was eating some kind of biscuits when I called. Said I'd hidden them."

Michael felt cold.

"Biscuits, Mrs. Jones, did you say biscuits?" Inspector Klary jumped on the word.

"Yes. But I never have them in the house, my diet doesn't let me."

"I picked up some in Utah last month." Michael sighed, "They're some kind of new dieting sensation over there called Chocóstuff Cookies. Maybe that's what he was eating."

"Thank you Mr. Jones, you've just given us some valuable information." She turned to a PC who was taking notes, "Tell the Coroner about this please, he may need to contact the US."

Neala shrieked "You mean a *Biscuit* killed my Son?"

"Can someone please help my wife?" Michael asked, holding onto her tightly.

"I'll give her a sedative Mr. Jones. It should help her to sleep." A Paramedic rummaged through his bag.

"How can I sleep when my SON is DEAD!" she began to struggle against Michael's hold.

The paramedic approached with a blister pack and a drink.

"NO! I refuse to sleep when the THING that killed my son is still out there!" Neala slapped her husband, shocking him into letting go. She dashed for the exit.

"Neala, come back!" Michael chased after her, "Neala! You'll just get in the way…" he grabbed her as she rounded the corner onto the airfield.

"That THING killed our son Michael! How can you stand there and say that I'll get in the way? I WANT REVENGE!"

"Neala…"

"Don't you dare *Neala* me! Look… Michael… is that the creature?"

"It must be. Come on; let the professionals deal with this."

"Michael, we have to kill it, destroy it for what it did to James…" she pleaded. Michael shook his head and she shook him off, "If you won't do something, then I will!"

A group of soldiers closed on her as she got nearer to the Blob. A pair of Policemen tried to pull Michael away, "Come on Mr. Jones, We'll get her out of there." He shook off their hands, watching numbly as Neala outdistanced the soldiers, attacking the thing with her hands. "Neala! No, don't…No!"

"All personnel are to remain at maximum distance from the creature. Avoid contact with any airborne vapour from the tanker or the creature. No one is to touch anything after the operation is complete." The Tannoy squealed on the last word and Booth winced, "Did you hear that Jamieson? Keep your men back."

"Yes, Sergeant Booth. Here's the Tanker now. Ingalls, Ward! Retreat to maximum safety distance!" He watched as the two soldiers tried to back off.

The now massive creature flowed towards them. They looked at each other, nodded and split up, heading in opposite directions.

"Bloody hell, that thing's dividing itself to chase them! We can't let that happen!" Booth bellowed. "Ingalls… Ward, get back together and head for the Tanker. Hopefully it will follow you and the crew can freeze it before it gets you!"

The two heard the instructions and changed direction. The two non-coms watched with mounting horror as the

thing sped up, rolling over Ingalls in a wave as they got closer to the truck.

"Shit! That bloody blob of jelly just ate one of my best men! What on earth are they waiting for?"

"Ward is still in the firing line Serge." Jamieson muttered.

"He'll be in the Pearly Gates Line if he doesn't run faster… Ward! GET A MOVE ON!"

Ward reached the dubious safety of the Tanker, banging on the door as he went past.

The Blob reared up in front of the Tanker, the edges curling round to embrace it like a giant anemone foot, when the crews began to blast it with the hoses. Ward swore and threw himself on to the grass as the spray rebounded off the creature.

The thinner edges of the blob, where it was translucent, began to cloud and stopped moving. There was a high pitched keen as the main part of the thing began to flow backward.

"It's slowed down Serge, that thing is near enough as big as the Tanker." Jamieson sighed. "It'll take some time. At least Ward got out of there."

"Only just… Remind me to take the whole squad out for a sixty mile run… YES! It's finally stopped moving!"

The Blob now looked like a huge scoop of pale brown chocolate, raspberry ripple ice-cream. The tanker crew sprayed it one last time, and then reversed away.

As the Squad got closer, Booth saw fine cracks appearing at the edges, "What's that?" He jumped back as a huge chunk cracked off and hit the floor, scattering crystals like dirty snow.

"Get back!" He roared "It's disintegrating."

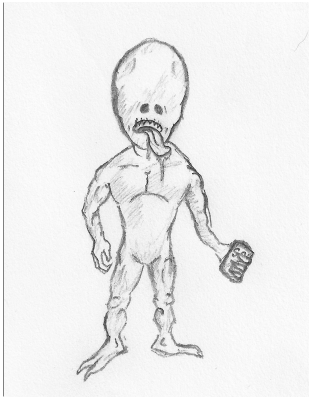
With a crash the blob decayed rapidly; soon it was just a mound of dust.

"I hope the wind doesn't get up, we'll have it everywhere!" Jamieson murmured. He looked closer, spotting a few inorganic remains from the Blob's Victims amongst the

crystals, "All that terror and all that remains is a pile of dust and a few plastic wrappers…"

'The Messers'

Suzie Bradshaw



I'm going to catch the little fuckers tonight.

Lying in bed I mute the television and wait. Certainly I'll hear them this time. Not over my husband's snoring though. It's two in the morning. Movement upstairs. From the footfalls and the squeaking of the door it's my oldest daughter. Moments later the toilet flushes, footsteps and squeaking door. She's back in bed. It's not my children or my husband.

I put mousetraps out but catch nothing, that's because it's not mice. Mice can't take cups and dishes and food out of the cupboards and refrigerator and place them randomly about the kitchen.

Every night before I retire the kitchen is spotless. Dishes done, counters wiped down, garbage taken out and the floor swept and mopped. It must be this way. It must!

I'm clever this time. I put a light sprinkling of flour on the counters. Oh, they will be found out. Yes they will.

I want to stay awake and listen but can't. Off to sleep I drift. In the morning I am the first to wake and run out to

the kitchen throwing on the light. Ah-ha! Look what I found. Would you just look at this? My excitement of finding the little foot (hoof?) prints vanishes as quickly as it came. I shiver as I glance around the kitchen and look at the peculiar impressions. My skin crawls as I imagine what creatures left these marks. I picture them crawling up my leg with their two-toed feet. They can't be very tall. Their feet are little bigger than that of a Barbie doll. Looking around I wonder where they might hide during the day. There's no visible ingress or egress to the kitchen.

My husband wakes and I immediately show him. He still believes the children are doing it. I give up trying to convince him it's the kitchen messers. They've been in my family since our days in Scotland following us to America. The eldest female in every family of the McNeal clan has been plagued. He reminds me to take my pills. I do. And he reminds me why my mother is locked away. It doesn't matter. The creatures are real. I know it. I have proof. I show my children the prints. They are tired, barely awake, and only mildly coherent. They grab pastries from the pantry, mumble something about crazy, and remind me to take my pills and head out the door.

I'm alone. I decide to take pictures of the prints before cleaning up. At the one-hour photo shop I smile and secretly congratulate myself for my mental prowess as I stand at the counter and wait. The young man looks at me but not for long. He averts his eyes and shakes his head. He must see the prints. He is amazed too. And then he speaks.

"Ma'am, you don't have to wait. You can come back in an hour. They'll be ready," he says looking me in the eye and then looking at the ground.

"Oh no, no, no, no! I'll wait for these. Yes, these are special pictures," I clap my hands and can barely contain my excitement.

His eyes widen. He shakes his head again. "Alright then." Customers come and go. Some catch my eye as I stand smiling with my secret knowledge. They don't stand close to

me for too long. I place my hand over my mouth and breathe out. Bad breath, that's what it is. I fumble through my purse for my tin of Altoids. I'm used to this. I must have really bad breath. I pop two in my mouth.

Finally the young photo guy brings me the pictures. I used an entire roll of film. He places the package on the counter and rolls his eyes. I don't like the eye roll but it doesn't matter today. I'm much too excited. I open the package and scan through the thirty-six photos. No one has ever been able to gather proof.

Outraged I yell at the young fellow. "What did you do? My pictures! What did you do to them?"

The big, hairy manager escorts me out of the store and asks me not to patronage his place again. That's fine I tell him. There are thousands of places I can develop my film and I go home.

It's for the best anyway. A new idea is born. I will hide and jump out with the camera tonight. I won't just get their hoof prints but I'll get them on camera. Ha! When life gives you lemons; make lemonade. That's me.

This time I keep it to myself. I get tired of hearing my husband remind me that my mother is in a nuthouse because of the little kitchen messers. When I was a kid I used to help her try and trap them. But we never did. That's what drove her mad. I won't let that happen to me. I. Will. Get. Them.

Everyone's in bed. I check the clock. It's twelve-thirty. I turn out the lights and step into the pantry closing the door. Not all the way mind you. There's a little crack where I can look out with one eye. I wait. I watch. I'm ready for them. I almost laugh. I've got them this time. I clutch the camera in one hand. They're so quiet it takes me by surprise when the pantry door opens. I want to scream but I stifle it and remember the camera. Snapping picture after picture and in the flash of the camera I see them scurrying behind the refrigerator. One turns and looks directly at me! I freeze. The sight frightens me so.

They are much more hideous then I imagined, so disproportionate in size, it's unnatural, unsettling. They have no eyes. But they have two holes where a nose should be and a tiny mouth with a tiny pink tongue that lulls to the side of their mouths. I shake and do a dance as if one has indeed crawled upon my leg, and up my spine.

No, no I won't let them win. Gathering my resolve I jump out of the pantry. I want to stomp them under my bare feet. I want to feel their gooey little bodies snap under my weight.

"I got you, ha ha, I got you suckers! You little sons of bitches, you won't drive me mad! I tell you! You won't you sons of whores." I scream and laugh until I cry and pull on the refrigerator with all my might but it won't budge.

* * *

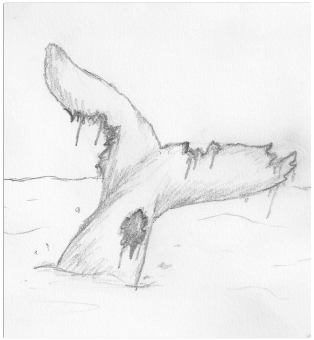
The medicine they give me wears off quicker now. No one knows because I play the game. I sit in my cozy, scantily furnished room looking between the bars of the window onto the parking lot. The sun has disappeared giving way to a full moon. Tonight's the night. I will be able to see with the full moon's light. I slumber to my bed, because that's how you have to do it, lie down and pull my baby blue blanket to my chin. They let me keep my favorite blankie from home. That was really nice of them. I wait. They don't mess the kitchen any more. I guess because I don't have a kitchen. But they move stuff in my room and they really like the play dough. They are good at sculpting. I wonder how, with no eyes. Boy, the things they make out of it. I think it's funny but my doctor and some of the nurses who see the figures don't find it amusing at all. They think I'm doing it and I don't argue with them. I just sit there and shake my head and let spittle run down my chin. That's how it's done here. They think they've got me. They don't. I contain a snicker and surreptitiously applaud myself for tricking them.

My eyes grow accustomed to lights out and I scan the room without moving my head. My heart thunders in my ears as I feel the gentle tug of my blanket. And another, and another. They are crawling onto my bed. I want to move my feet away but I don't dare move. I see their little rodent-like hands grasp at the foot of the bed and then their heads pop up. The moon light glistens on their hairless heads. Their tiny little tongues hanging awkwardly out of their tiny little mouths. It's the first time I notice they smell like peanut butter. I clutch my blankie and pull it to just below my eyes. I'm going to see them close up finally. I'm going to grab one and hold on tight throwing a fit so the nurses come running in. Ha, then they'll see alright. I'm not mad.

But part of me wants to run. Part of me wishes I had a camera so I don't have to touch them. The biggest part of me wonders what they're going to mess up now as they creep on their hooves ever so close to my face.

'Jonah and the Dead'

Eric S. Brown



Darkness had become his world. Jonah tapped the switch on the right arm of his armor, opening the suit's controls. The dim light of its LCD hurt his eyes. According to the data on the screen, he'd been trapped here for over two hours now. The armor's power levels were still dropping much more rapidly than they should. He needed a way out and soon or it wouldn't matter if he escaped or not. He wouldn't have enough air or power left to reach the surface.

He twisted around against the constricting walls of rotting tissue and tired again to rip through it. His metal encased fingers dug into the wall but no matter how hard he strained, he couldn't tear it. The tissue was too dense. The bleeping noise of the armor internal alarm system made him scowl. The suit was warning him that the acidity level of the liquid around him was beginning to take its toll on the armor's integrity as if he didn't have enough problems.

The personal of Marinaris Base 1 never thought they'd have to deal with the virus which was spreading like wildfire across the globe above. No one knew where it came from or how it started. Indeed, the word virus was hardly an apt description but it was the closest thing that science could label the microorganism which leapt from host to host killing the body then reanimating it in a perpetual state of rage and

hunger for the flesh of the living. Even when it crossed species, no one in the base seemed concerned until dead fish began to flock outside the facility. The fish circled the base, day and night, hunting for an opening through which to get inside. Often they would hurl themselves time and time again into the heavy glass of the observation windows which were built to withstand the pressures of the ocean's depth leaving splatters of blood and skin on the glass.

The Marinaris Base was self sufficient. They grew their own food and drew power from geo-thermal generators. The airlocks and the sub bays had been sealed off and life went on, the only difference was the biologists spent their time trying to study the dead virus and find a way to kill it not studying the mysteries of the dark and beautiful world around them.

The whales had taken them all off guard. They came from out of nowhere. Three of them in all. The mass and strength of their enormous forms was more than the walls of the Marinaris base could withstand as the titans rammed into it. Jonah managed to make it to the storage room where the suits of armor used for exploration of the trench were kept and donned one in time to survive the flood of water which filled the facility as its power shut down and its structure ruptured in numerous places. He'd blasted through one of the exterior walls with a well placed charge of C4 and hit open water. The surface counterpart to the Marinaris Base still floated above as far as he knew and his plan was to reach it and try to call for help.

The whales were still in the area though. They moved faster in death than in life. One of the monsters got the drop on him and had swallowed him whole, damaging his armor with its teeth in the process. Now he raced the clock to escape its digestive tract before the reaper came to collect his soul.

He still had some C4 tucked away in his suit's storage pack and the suit's arms were equipped with cutting torches but neither helped him. Using the power needed to cut his

way out of the whale with the torches would drain his suit to the point of being immobile. The C4 was an equally deadly option. A whale's stomach wasn't a massive cavern, especially when constricted from decay, like in the cartoons. Its walls pressed against the exterior of his armor trying to crush it. The C4 would blow him apart too even if it did rupture the whale's corpse.

Jonah squirmed to get into a position where he could see the control panel on his arm's LCD again. He tapped a few keys and shut off the suit's CO2 scrubbers. If he was going to die, it might as well be comfortably. As long as the acid didn't breach his armor before the CO2 caused him to pass out, his dreams would be eternal. He thought of his wife above, who was likely long dead, and imagined her arms around him as he closed his eyes and stopped struggling, going away to a better place.

'The Lunatic Brigade'

Kevin Wallis



When you hear us in your dreams,
Try not to be afraid.
You'll soon add your own screams,
To the Lunatic Brigade.

This is what echoes through my head at night, when I close my eyes. And every morning I awake and wait for the coming war.

* * *

When the strangers first appeared outside my house that night, I called them an 'army of freaks.' I said it tongue-in-cheek at the time, but I didn't know then what I know now. It was the beginning of the end for me.

"Nancy, come here," I called, my fingers tracing the outline of my birthmark. "There's an army of freaks outside."

There had only been three or four when I first noticed the strangers through the living room window. Standing just outside the circle of light created by the street lamps, they congregated like a mischievous pack of teens. After an hour, though, they remained on the street, just beyond my front yard, the details of their features cloaked in midnight shadow.

A shroud of unease draped over me as I realized they were not wayward street punks. Straining my eyes to decipher their forms through the darkness, I first thought the night clouded my senses. The figures looked warped, bent at wrong angles; one stooped and distorted, another corpse-thin and towering like a walking totem pole.

My finger followed my birthmark's port-wine trails, up a cheek, across my nose, settling on the corner of my lips, and my trepidation began to tiptoe towards fear.

"Who are they?" Nancy asked.

"Don't know. They've been huddled there for awhile."

"Should we call the cops?"

I cocked an eyebrow at her and she laughed. "And tell them what? Come arrest some weirdos for standing on public property?"

A light and tinny voice piped behind us. "Who's standing on public property?" I turned to our son.

"No one, George. Me and Mommy are just talking."

Like most six-year-olds, George's capacity for sniffing out parental bullshit had recently increased tenfold. He glared at me, his vibrant green eyes blinding even through his narrowed, angry lids. "Liar, liar, pants on--"

"Paul." Nancy's words fired warnings through the room. I looked back out the window.

The few had become many. Lined shoulder to shoulder, the strangers stood statue-still, like stone gargoyles descended from their cathedral perches. The new arrivals, eight or ten in all, were just as awkward and unnatural as the original few, although their features remained hidden behind the dark.

Every one of them faced our house. Every one of them stared at my family through our window.

"Now we call the cops," I said. "Where's the cell?"

"It was in my purse, Paul." Nancy sounded exasperated, impatient. I knew it was just the seedlings of fear. "Both our phones were in my purse."

"Shit." The three of us had gone to the playground earlier that day, and Nancy's purse had been stolen off a park bench as she shot pictures of George on the monkey bars. And thanks to our frugal decision to drop our land line service, we were now cut off from the outside world.

Across the street, a porch light turned on, followed by Ms. O'Neal stepping outside, her arms gesticulating like an angry marionette. I couldn't hear her words, but I got the gist. She didn't appreciate loiterers outside her house this late at night.

The strangers sprang to life. The tall one whipped his arm towards my still-lecturing neighbor. Like a trained rhino, another of the freaks broke rank and charged, granting me a brief window of clear sight as he passed beneath a street lamp. His body was swollen, nude, and almost spherical. What looked like a thick leash hung loose from his neck. He lunged towards the suddenly silent woman on thick, squat legs resembling cement blocks more than appendages. Arms like the under branches of ancient oaks pushed off the ground, spurring the thing forward with a dizzying speed that belied his massive frame.

Ms. O'Neal turned to run back inside her house, but the charging mass was on her too fast. He crashed into her, full-speed, and they both disappeared through the door in a blur of arms and legs and screams.

The night was silent once more.

"Out back, now." I spun Nancy and George away from the window and herded them towards the back door. My plan was simple: get to the car, run over anyone in my way, and haul ass to the police station.

Swiping the car keys from the kitchen island, I sprinted for the back door. Nancy had her hands over George's eyes as they ran past me, a scared mother's equivalent of an ostrich burying its head to deny the danger around it. I prayed George hadn't seen what happened to Ms. O'Neal; his mood was hard to read - silent, pensive.

The freaks had beaten us to the back. Just as I grasped the back doorknob, a face from a demon's carnival threw itself against the small door window. Smeared paint of every color streaked the masked thing before us, like a clown's makeup after hours of sweating. Rubber smashed against glass, warping the already hideous mask and plastering blue and green and red across the window.

I jumped back, cursing, temporarily drowning out the clown's screaming laugh, or maybe it was a laughing scream.

Glass shattered from the living room.

"Get in the bedroom." I tried to keep the panic at bay, out of my voice, tried to sound in control for my family, but George was the only person who appeared collected. He actually looked *amused*. "Do you remember where the gun is?"

"We have a gun?" George's emerald eyes grew large.

"Yes," Nancy said to me or George or both. She grabbed the back of George's head and started to shove him into our bedroom, but he spoke up in a voice we had never heard from his six-year-old mouth.

"Wait."

My son reached for my face, his eyes burning a hypnotic green. His tiny fingers touched my face, caressed my birthmark, and traced its path like he had done countless times before. Then he smiled his mischievous six-year-old smile, turned, and skipped into the bedroom like any other kid bounding towards the tree on Christmas morning.

More glass exploded from the living room behind me. I heard tittering, groaning, inhuman laughing, a cacophony of madness. The masked clown was still there, in the window, waving now.

I started to close the bedroom door behind Nancy, but her hand stopped it mid-swing. "Aren't you coming?" she asked, her eyes half-dollar wide, her voice high and trembling. I know I should've gone with them. I probably could have hidden, picked off a few as they entered the room. Maybe they would have panicked, left us alone. But I didn't go. I wanted the intruders as far away from my wife and son as

possible, and if I had to block the door to keep them out, then that's what I'd do.

"I'll be fine." I reached around the doorknob, locked it from the inside, and slammed it shut. Wishing I had another gun, but refusing to leave Nancy and George defenseless, I grabbed a fire poker from the nearby fireplace. I turned around, and began to believe in the bogeyman.

They stood inside my house, all of them, glaring at me with eyes dripping malice.

I lifted my poker with rubber arms and backed against the door separating my family from his madness.

There's a bounty on your soul
The Devil has just paid.
So come embrace your role
In the Lunatic Brigade.

This from a giggling bald girl in the back. A waifish body suggested prepubescence, but the pained sneer on her face and the horror locked behind her eyes spoke of years beyond adolescence. Chains connected her ears to her nose to her bare nipples, then back to her ears in a ludicrous triangle. She clapped her hands off rhythm as she chanted.

She was the mildest of the crew.

Next to the poetic woman-child stood the beast I had last seen crashing into Ms. O'Neal. Blood and what I assumed were bits of neighbor-flesh coated the countless deep-lined crevices and razored teeth of his, *its*, face. A thick-chained leash attached the beast's neck to the wrist of a man with skin-straining muscles. A reflective metal faceplate, like a goalie's mask crafted from mirrored glass, covered the man's face.

There were others besides the Poet, the Beast, and the Goalie, as my babbling subconscious had already dubbed them. Every size, dwarf-small to sideshow obese. Too many crazed smiles and flickering eyes. What might be a beak here, an eyeless face there, a masturbating thing in the corner. The

Clown joined the party before long, apparently bored with my back porch.

I tried to speak, tried to summon the appropriate threats to change whatever plans this gang had in its collective mind, but my voice drowned beneath disbelief. People like this didn't exist, people more humanoid than human, and they did not break into my house. The world around me, confined to four thin walls and several shattered windows, floated by me in slow-motion dream-time, as fictional and insubstantial as a nightmare. I was always logical, a realist, but ten minutes ago I had been gazing out of my window in a bored stupor, and now the figures looming before me crushed these notions like a jackhammer to my concrete mind.

Then he entered, and my fear swelled to a fever pitch. He stood seven feet tall, probably flirting with eight, a tower of flesh and bone. Of that surreal length, at least three of it was all face. The conical apex of his skull jutted to the right at a stomach-sickening angle. His face, barely wide enough to house eyes and nose and mouth, ended in a jaw as long and pointed as a torpedo. His chin also bent to the right, giving his head the look of an abstract, skin-smothered crescent moon. Black marks which once might have resembled stars but now bled into his pasty skin encircled his eyes. Coal-black lips and a bright purple jumpsuit punctuated the terrible absurdity of the man.

Weakness, *smallness*, consumed me. My free hand strayed to my birthmark like a scared child reaching for his security blanket.

"Paul Gleason?" Moon Face said.

His words dropped down on me like a guillotine of bass.

I might have said 'Who are you,' like a poorly written melodrama, or I might have just thought it. Either way, Moon Face didn't answer.

"We've been looking for you a long time, Mr. Gleason."

I finally spoke. "The cops are on their way."

Moon Face laughed a tumbling rumble. Behind him, grinning like a furry Jack-O-Lantern, a man with hair covering every inch of his face and a lolling, foot-long tongue raised a small brown purse in the air – Nancy's purse. He pulled two cell phones from the purse, lifted them to his ears, and pantomimed a frenetic conversation like a drunken silent movie actor. They had this all planned, I realized. *Why?*

"I don't blame you for being frightened," Moon Face said. "We're a scary bunch, I guess. And I don't blame you for not knowing who we are." He took a few steps towards me, his legs resembling hinged stilts underneath his baggy pants. I tried to retreat some steps, but the door blocked me. Instead, I shuffled to my right to put more distance between us.

Moon Face continued. "Nobody has seen us in decades. Your trite little world could never fathom us before. So now no one knows who we are. But everyone knows what we've done."

The topless Poet began to sing again.

You will pray at night in bed
To angels heaven made.
We'll be there in their stead.
We're the Lunatic Brigade.

My chest tightened more with every word. Moon Face simply smiled. "Shut up, girl." He looked at me with apology lining his deformed face. "She's incorrigible."

He paused, crossed his arms, apparently deciding it was my turn to speak. Terror froze my tongue until I finally muttered, "Don't hurt us." The husband and father in me struggled to overbear the cowardice, but the monsters before me had already slain my inner hero. I fought to revive him.

"We don't want to hurt any of you, Mr. Gleason, but I'm afraid that is out of our hands. That depends on you." Moon Face walked forward, and again I shuffled right, not wanting to breathe the same air as this man.

"What do you want?" More melodramatic crap. The Beast rumbled what might have been a laugh.

"Mr. Gleason, we've been here a long, long time. Before your great-great-grandmother spread for your great-great-grandfather. We've been hunted, persecuted, pursued, even when all we wanted in ages past was to co-exist with you. But all they see all *you* see, is our . . . uniqueness. And so you do what you have always done. You shoot to kill."

Another step, forward for him, sideways for me. To my left, a man, old and decrepit if not ancient, with studded, criss-crossed belts hanging off his chest reminding me of an executioner three sizes too small for his killing garb, leered at me with a malevolence fit for murder and spat on my carpet. The Beast growled.

"So eventually we stopped running," Moon Face said. "We fought back. We burned cities to the ground. We sunk ships, eliminated those we deemed hurtful to our cause." He continued gliding forward. "We toppled skyscrapers."

The fire poker grew heavy, slick with sweat. I grasped it with both hands and tried to still my shaking. He couldn't be telling the truth, but the corners of my mind knew these things had no reason to lie to me. Moon Face leaned forward, his eyes trapping my own in prisms as purple as his suit.

"But something's been missing," he said. "Our teachings speak of a savior. A man who will emerge to lead us and make this world right again, our general in the battles to come. We've waited for our signal, a sign to beckon us to our final war."

He motioned with his hand, and the masked Goalie strode forward with the chained Beast shambling in his wake. Moon Face smiled. "Then we saw you."

I gazed into the Goalie's reflective mask as the gigantic man leaned forward. I had seen my birthmark in the bathroom mirror thousands of times, but now, warped by the convexity of the mirror-mask, my mark took on a new, soul-freezing shape.

A violet 'L', contrasting violently with my pale skin, started on the left side of my forehead and curled over my eye. Beside it, covering the bridge of my nose and ascending to my hairline, a misshapen but legible 'B'.

LB. *We're the Lunatic Brigade.*

My fear snapped and withered, replaced by black rage. They murder a helpless old woman, break into my home, terrify my family, and expect me to *lead* them? The poker felt light and eager now. I prepared to lunge at Moon Face.

Before I could even raise my weapon, something hard and heavy slammed into my head from behind. I collapsed, pain exploding and spreading, the echoes of a metallic clang resounding in my ears. I landed on my face, my poker falling next to me. I just had time to roll over and glimpse the Clown holding my solid steel floor lamp, its base slick with my blood, before they were on me.

The pain, all the dizziness and confusion from the lamp attack, faded before the Lunatic Brigade's onslaught. Fists and boots, nails and teeth, they stormed down on me in a deluge of insanity. I curled into a fetal ball, tried to cover my head, my genitals. But the blows found their marks. I struggled to stay conscious; I had to protect–

Nancy. Oh God, George. *There was nobody guarding the door.*

Too late, I realized all of Moon Face's steps towards me had been designed to turn me, expose my back, and move me away from the door.

As if reading my thoughts, the Beast broke from the assault and charged the door, dragging his now unshackled leash behind him. The door shattered as the Beast plowed into it. Barely squeezing his obese body through the narrow doorway, the Beast lumbered into the bedroom.

Maybe they're hiding, I thought. Maybe he won't find them. I knew better.

As I listened for sounds of struggle, or the wails of death, from the bedroom, I realized with a dull passiveness that the Brigade had stopped beating me. Barely human

hands and feet still pinned me to the floor. My body felt thrashed, shredded. Liquid warmth flowed from countless wounds and poured over my numb face. I tried raising my arm to prop myself up - I'd crawl to the bedroom if I had to - but my body refused to obey.

Until the gunshots. Two bursts from the bedroom, like fireworks exploding at point-blank. I screamed, a noise both human and animal, and grabbed the closest monster to me. I didn't weigh options, I didn't think at all, I only knew that my family was fighting for their lives and I would rip through every last one of these fuckers to get to them.

My rage was futile; my vengeance, a dream. I raised my hand, curled it into a weak semblance of a fist, but couldn't summon the strength to swing. My hand, as harmless as a glove, plopped onto the Clown's face, trying to pull that damned mask off. I could revel in that small victory, at least. But although the handful of cheek I grabbed felt dead-cold and artificial, it held firmly to bone when I pulled; not the synthetic rubber of a deformed mask, but icy, malleable, clown-pigmented flesh.

My mind, my reason, began to abandon me.

A scream from the bedroom. A crash, a thud. Then silence.

I looked at Moon Face through blood-blurred eyes. "I'll never help you."

The mob backed away as Moon Face knelt once more before me. Smiling, he placed one enormous hand behind my neck and raised me up until our noses nearly touched. His breath smelled of sewage.

"Silly Mr. Gleason," he said. Behind him, the Poet began to chant.

"Spawned from he with painted face . . ."

"You don't understand."

"With eyes as green as jade . . ."

"We're not here for you."

"He'll take his destined place. . ."

"We're here for your son."

"Atop the Lunatic Brigade."

No, no, no. The word cycled endlessly in my mind, a mind now simple and cobwebbed over.

"You don't know what we've seen." Moon Face's visage morphed, amusement contorting into anger and disgust. "You don't know what we've done. But soon you will know it all."

I struggled against him, but his hand on my neck could have been a vice. I managed only a pitiful growl.

"Soon we will return, and when we do, with our armies vast and hungry, the earth will burn. And you will watch your son lead it all." His voice faded to a whisper. Behind him, his henchmen cackled and clapped. "Tell me, Mr. Gleason, what will you see when you gaze into his brilliant green eyes? *Who* will you see?"

I wanted to fight, to kill, but I could do . . . absolutely . . . nothing.

Moon Face dropped me to the ground like a flimsy mannequin. The monsters behind him roared, seemed to explode in demented delight. Their boss took the floor lamp from the grinning Clown, raised it over my face, and started to sing.

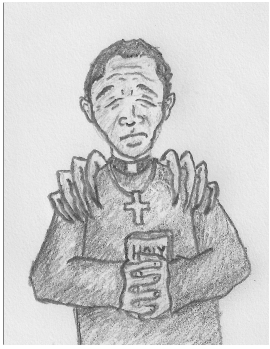
As our prophecy's fulfilled,
We take our sharpened blade.
Now watch the blood be spilled . . .

The lamp fell. The last thing I saw before my face shattered and I faded to unconscious blackness was the Beast emerging from the bedroom. He carried George on his shoulders.

My son was smiling.

'What Is Left Behind'

John C. Lewis



I really didn't want to go but after all it was a bunch of friends of mine and anyone that knows me will tell you I always support those around me in whatever they do. When the phone call came in I pretty much figured the answer long before the question was even asked.

"Hey, Charlie, we're gonna be down there tonight doin' that show. You're gonna be there, right?"

I sighed and shook my head. Thank God George couldn't see that because he would have bitch slapped me for sure. I decided to play it safe and be semi-honest with him. "Well, I knew you were comin' cause Stewie called ahead of you. I was planning on doing something with Stephanie..."

"Oh, that's perfect," George exclaimed enthusiastically, "this is an all ages family show so bring your daughter along. Tell her to bring some friends if she wants. I'm bringing a couple of my kids. The more the merrier."

"Well, if that's the case, count us in. I'll see you guys at the church." I hung up the phone.

I really had wanted to do something with Steph so now I could make my former band mates happy as well as entertain my daughter and a couple of her friends by taking

them to the concert. It was going to be fun. Shows featuring band members from our old group were always guaranteed to be a good time.

A couple hours later Stephanie, her friend Amy, and I were on our way to the "Third Church of Universal Truth and Enlightenment," one of those new age Christian Churches that seemed to be popping up all over the country. That's just what the town of Tanglewood, Florida needed...another new idea Christian church.

It took about twenty minutes to get to the church, the sun still bright in the western sky. We were a couple hours early so we managed to get a parking spot by the main entrance. Thank God the space was near the door because this was a part of town that one really didn't want to be found wandering around in after dark, if you know what I mean. But that's another story for another time.

We stepped into the church which was located on a small street away from any of the main thoroughfares. It was very quaint inside and strangely inviting. I don't go to church very often but that doesn't mean I don't believe, much to the surprise of many of my newer friends. They usually assume I'm either some paganistic throwback or an atheistic weirdo. That is..., until they get to know me.

Looking up towards the pulpit I noticed the guys were still bringing equipment into the church so I offered to pitch in and help. They were very appreciative as this would allow for quicker set-up time. Hell, they might even have a chance to do a sound check.

In no time at all we had everything inside the church and on the stage. I continued helping them hook everything up. Having played with a couple of the guys before meant that I was no stranger to how they wanted their equipment arranged.

"Just like old times, ay Charlie."

I looked at George who was carrying the other side of a huge bass cabinet to one side of the stage. "You said it George. I'll tell you what though..." we set the cabinet down

and I let out a little grunt. "...Uh! I sure don't miss lugging all this equipment around. I thought by this stage of the game you guys would have roadies do this for you."

George pointed over to a couple guys who were carrying cable bags and microphone stands into the building. "You'd think so but at our level, which is one step up from the bottom, we still have to move the heavy stuff ourselves. They handle our...," George put his fingers up in the quotation mark sign; "...Light work." We both got a hearty laugh out of it.

Some things never change.

A little while later, with sound check complete, the place began to see some activity as several members of the church congregation showed up for the "Free Concert." "Truth seer" was born out of the shadows of our old metal band "Black Velvet." Theirs was a message of hope and salvation unlike the more fantastical vision that I gave the old band. Theirs was a good band, and I was looking forward to reveling in what they had to say.

The first set went off without a hitch and the kids loved the loud music. To them it didn't matter what the songs were about, just that it was loud Rock & Roll. A little tame for me, but for my twelve year old daughter and her friend, it was cool and that was fine.

After the first set I noticed there was very little activity from the crowd. They were all attentive and graciously clapped after each song but still they sat. It was almost like they didn't know what else to do. I decided to try and "Kick this party into high gear" so I went over and talked to George and Stewie about doing my "Thing." They laughed and thought it was a great idea.

The second, and final set, started and I got up in front of the stage and began head-banging to their mild Rock & Roll sound. It seemed to work because others around me began to get up and start clapping, moving forward toward the stage. I cast a glance back at Steph and Amy, catching them laughing with embarrassment over my clownish antics.

Suddenly things took a change and that's when everything got weird. In between songs the preacher brought out some people and did the whole purging of their illnesses and problems thing and then knocking them unconscious with a mere touch. The crowd became more frantic as the music continued with the preacher performing his own act off to the side of the stage. Then with everybody moaning and chanting he stepped out in front of the band and spoke to me in another language and at a very low, almost inaudible, tone. He then stood up, held out his bible, and said, "can you understand me my son."

I looked up at him and said, "what did you say?"

At this point many of the congregation closed around me and I felt several hands patting my back, all the while the people lost in a kind of religious ecstasy. The preacher leaned back down and spoke in the same foreign language with the same inaudible tone. He stood upright again asking if I could understand.

This time I made the mistake of playing right into his hands. "I don't understand what you're saying." Still the music raged on. The minister, looking over his flock, said, "You see, he doesn't understand the word of God. He is surely possessed and must be purged. Together we can save him."

The no good son-of a-bitch Charlatan exposed himself for what he really was... a fraud. Sure I didn't understand him. He was speaking another language and under his breath to boot.

At his signal several of the members moved in, all laying hands upon me and praying, most with their eyes closed. He stood on the pulpit, looking down at me, smiling, and the phony shit-eating grin of a Carny if I ever saw one.

I suddenly felt warmth emanating from my body that I'd never experienced before. It was as though I was being purged of something and I didn't like it. I looked up at him and smiled, slowly making my way out of the crowd. Most of the congregation was so deep in their own religious ecstasies' they never noticed. I grabbed the girls, who were now crying,

and left the church. On the way home they asked me what happened and I just told them the people at the church were performing a religious ceremony and there was no reason for them to worry.

We went straight home after dropping Amy off at her house. I felt strangely exhausted and more than a little pissed at the preacher for ruining my night and scaring my daughter. Needless to say, sleep came easy.

The next morning George called. He was frantic on the phone and not really making any sense. I asked him what the problem was. He told me all hell broke loose in the church just after they finished playing. Things got so bad the guys left their equipment and ran. "It's on the news now, turn it on."

With phone in hand I went over to turn on the television. A reporter was standing outside the church, her voice nervously reading from an obviously prepared statement released by the police.

"Behind me is the scene of one of the most brutal mass killings ever seen here in Tanglewood. Minister Don Cunningham and at least ten of his congregation have been brutally murdered. Police will not comment on the names of the victims as they are not really sure how many there are. Eye witnesses say that some invisible force began ripping through the crowd, literally rendering many of them limb from limb. There are body parts strewn all over the inside of the church. One of the survivors thought he saw a wavering in the air, like heat waves, followed by the brief appearance of something, as he described it, a monster straight from his worst nightmares. This reporter has no clue what to think of this and by the looks on the faces of police officials, they are completely baffled. This is Bridget Stall reporting."

I turned off the television. George was talking a mile a minute. "Can you believe that? It was like something ripped out of the pages of a horror book."

"Or, the soul of a man," I offered. "I'll tell you one thing George, when a place leaves one with a foul taste, it

reaps what it sows and in the end there can be no responsibility for what is left behind. I have to hand it to them though, a little purging now and then is good for the soul."

I hung up the phone.

'Night Crawler'

Donna Jean Lyons



Hate is an ugly creature. One I never gave much thought to. It had never reared its nasty head in my direction. I couldn't possibly fathom what it honestly was or how it operated. I just thought it was a blood-drenched whipping boy for the weak, granting them an evil logic to do unspeakable things to one another. I pretended it was something people wanted in their lives, maybe even needed. I believed God gave us free will to use as we seen fit. I didn't comprehend all the talk about how hate cultivates until it devours you. Unlike most, I know when my hate started. Does that make me any luckier? No, it only gives me a time line to work with.

November 24, 2006, that's the rainy evening, I stumbled in on Charlie's babysitter, Tina. She was hemorrhaging out on my misty white Persian rug. Tina reminded me of Christmas. I don't know if it was because her Kermit the Frog colored jogging outfit was tie-dyed in blood, or if it was, the fact, her corpse was exhibited like a big red and green present, waiting on a bed of Persian snow,

for me to open the front door and find. All I know for sure is that, Charlie's disappearance was the fertilizer that germinated the seed of hate inside me. I can sense it growing stronger and, like anything that grows, it needs to be fed. It's continuously screaming out for the food of retribution but, thanks to the local law enforcement officers, I have nothing in my cupboards to shove down its growling belly. I feed it pain, on a daily basis, and supply it with a fresh fountain of tears to drink, but it's never enough to quench its revengeful thirst or gratify its dark hunger. Therefore, that only leaves me for it to eat.

In the beginning, I didn't leave the house for longer than an hour at a time. It's strange, don't you think, me not leaving? Nearly everyone, given the option, wouldn't choose to step a foot back across the threshold of Hell, but it's the only place my hate feels comfortable. So comfortable, in fact, that for the last year, we haven't left at all. Some days I wish the hate would just finish me off, especially, when I look in the mirror. I'm finding it difficult to recognize myself, two lifeless, unfamiliar black pools of oil staring back at me. That's what I see when I look at my reflection, that and the face of death.

My stomach grumbles, I'm so hungry I could eat the ass end out of a rag doll. I worm my way through the house, searching for something to fill my gut. When you don't leave the house, and you cannot afford delivery, slim pickens takes on a whole new meaning.

I raise my face up from a half-rotten jar of canned tomatoes. The click of the answering machine picking up, followed by a familiar voice, and snares my attention. "This message is for Christen Galloway. This is Sergeant Stapleton from the Blue Lake Police Department. I'm calling to inform you that we apprehended Smoky Johnson this afternoon. He was walking Charlie's English bulldog, Ralphy, when we spotted him in the park. He's the man we think is responsible for your son's abduction…Christen, I figured you'd want to know."

He figured right. I slam the glass jar to the kitchen floor. Pain brings me to my knees and curls me up into a tight ball. My lower body fuses together, causing the blood vessels in my legs to swell and erupt. My blood boils, reducing my bones to a brittle pile of ash settling in the pit of my stomach. Pictures of my son fire off inside my mind as my head explodes in pain. I claw at my mouth with long discolored nails. It feels like my face is giving birth to an elephant. I rip at my lips until they tear away. Thick, bloody slobbers swing from the gaping hole, as two layers of small shark like teeth cut through my gums. My bulging eyes spot the door. I inch my way across the floor. The sunlight streaming through the living room window fills my sense of smell with cooking meat and momentarily blinds me. Rolling behind the food-stained couch, I wait for darkness to fall. His judgment and my son's revenge are so close I can almost taste it.

At long last, the day is swallowed by the night. I push my head through Ralphy's doggie door. I look both ways before squeezing out onto the abandoned streets. I work my body up the narrow sidewalk, one pulsating movement at a time, to the police station. I squish by one overworked, underpaid deputy sleeping on the job in the front seat of his city cruiser. I cling to the brick wall with the suckers, which line my tender undersurface. I slide through the open window and slouch across Sergeant Stapleton's desk.

Searching the sleepy cells in a small town jail, I find redemption hiding on the edge of a jailhouse cot and smoking a cigarette. He wasn't half the monster, I had pictured in my mind. He was a small, runt of a man. I studied his face by the red glowing end of a cigarette. He sucked on the off-white stick and ran his dirty fingers through his sugar and cinnamon colored hair. Then I imagined how intimidating and large he must have appeared to an innocent one-year-old, little boy.

A chunky slime builds up in the back of my throat. I ram the steel bars with my body. He jumps to his feet and

approaches the cell door. That's all I needed him to do. I bite into his ankles and commenced pulling and chewing. I tear through his wicked meat like a chainsaw through a dry twig. The texture of his clothing moving over my tongue gags me. He's screaming out for help inside a black abyss. But, just like my son, no one can hear his cries of fear. I didn't stop winding him in, until he had vanished just like Charlie.

I slither back out the same way I came in, through the open window, undetached by the cover of night. I crawl past the unwatchful eye of Deputy Tanner and down the middle of Pike street. Passing by 'Lights to a Brighter Future' I catch a glimpse of myself in the glass, showroom window. I look like an overgrown grub worm with a well-feed, greasy gray, lumpy body. I smile revealing my big mouth stuffed full of crocked fangs.

I seek shelter, from the damning rays of the sun, down the alley and find it inside a filthy dumpster. I lay here eating and wondering, wondering and eating. I don't know what I expected to happen, once I had tasted the sweet revenge of my son's killer. I guess, maybe I thought I'd change back, or, at least, die. However, neither one happened, which only leaves me with one choice. I squirm my way out of the dumpster and splat to the warm concrete below. I feel my slimy, wet form begin to dry up and shrink as the blaring noonday sun scorches my grotesque flesh. As the hours pass by, the pain subsides, and I'm finding myself comfortable numb. Just laying here, dwindling away to nothing more than another dead fish worm on the sidewalk, knowing because of my hate Charlie can rest in peace. Two, large, black holes cover me.

"Ralphy, do you have something there, boy?" It's Sergeant Stapleton. He must be using Ralphy to follow the bloody scent of my son's killer, or maybe he's looking for me. Massive amounts of bulldog drool, drip down onto my lifeless form and plumps me back up like a dehydrated pea in a rainstorm.

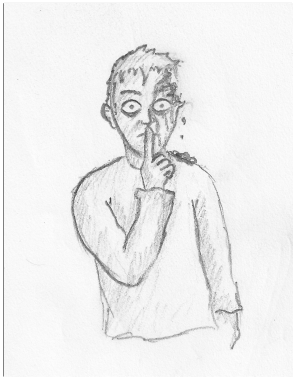
I hear Sergeant Stapleton pilfering around inside the metal walls of the dumpster. "Dear God in Heaven, that sick fucking bastard."

I look up from the concrete as he pulls something from the dumpster. He lays it to the side and Ralphy bolts to join him. Ralphy beginnings circling the bloody pile of rags, he stops, gives a whimper, and rests beside the carnage.

Sergeant Stapleton swipes away a loose tear and consolingly strokes Ralphy's broad, wrinkly head. "I know how you feel, ole boy. That lying son-of-a-bitch said he hadn't killed Charlie. I'm just glad I didn't tell Christen, that there was a chance, Charlie was still alive, and Smoky had stashed the boy somewhere close."

'Manifestation'

John Bruni



When Colly Storke's son shot himself in the head, not a year after Colly's wife had done the same; the old man never expected a bright day ever again.

He knew why Gretchen had done it; news had arrived regarding the deaths of all ten of her brothers, shot down by the ill-bred yankees at Chickamauga. They'd been very close, and to lose them all at the same time drove her insane with grief.

Yet he had no idea as to why Jeremiah would follow his mother's example. If it had been over Gretchen, wouldn't he have done it sooner than three months later? There had to be some other reason, but no matter how hard he wracked his brain, he couldn't figure it out.

Before burying his son, Colly took the rifle, which was still stained with the blood of the two people he loved the most in the world, to the barn, where he took a hammer to the killing device that would haunt his dreams for the rest of his life. When the gun was completely destroyed, he took the splintered stock and tossed it in the fireplace. It didn't do

much good, but it gave him the satisfaction of knowing the damnable weapon would never take another life.

Three nights later, after he blew out his candle to go to sleep, he heard something moving near the foot of his bed. Despite the darkness of the room (and it was so thick he couldn't even see the bedposts), he saw a form standing there. Colly knew the five-nine frame. He knew the wild blond hair that could never be tamed by scissors and comb alike. He knew the large, jutting adam's apple. He knew the pale cheeks that would never be touched by a razor.

And he was all too familiar with the gaping, ragged hole at the side of his head and the stew of meat that could be seen through it. The blood that had run down his face so thickly that it covered his features, the pieces of brain sticking to his shoulder.

He was about to leap up and hug Jeremiah when his son put a finger to his own lips. Colly's brow furrowed and he whispered, "Why?"

Jeremiah pointed in the direction of the front door, then turned and started walking. Colly fumbled for the matches on the night table and lit the candle. The room brightened around him. He expected that Jeremiah would disappear with the light, but there he was, standing by the door. In fact, Colly could see the door through his son.

Jeremiah paused, and then beckoned for his father to follow. When he turned and stepped forward, Jeremiah went through the solid wood and vanished. Shielding the candle with one hand, Colly walked to the door, opened it, and went outside.

The moon shone down, and the stars stretched across the sky as far as he could see, but Colly thought that even if it had been cloudy out, he would still be able to see Jeremiah as clearly as he could see him now, as if his son was made of light. When he saw Jeremiah walking toward the woods, he knew where he was headed: to the old shack.

Colly never paid much attention to the decrepit little cabin, and he had never gone it. It wasn't on his land, so why

should he care? He knew Jeremiah went there from time to time to play, which Colly had told him never to do. The place should have been razed years ago, when the Smiths had abandoned their land for the west. One strong breeze was all it would take, considering how it was falling apart, but the trees around the shack acted as a shelter.

Jeremiah's pale form eased through the splintered door, and Colly pushed the rotting wood aside so he could follow. Once inside, Colly saw Jeremiah hovering over what looked like recently disturbed dirt. He pointed to a shovel in the corner, and Colly realized it was his own. The last time he'd seen it was in his son's hands two days before his death. He remembered trying to find it to bury his son. He'd had to go to town to buy a new one. Why would Jeremiah bring it here?

That wasn't the question Colly asked, though. "You want me to dig?"

Jeremiah nodded.

"Why?"

His son pointed to the dirt, as if that explained everything, and Colly put the candle down on a wobbly table. He took up the shovel and began to dig, wondering what Jeremiah could have buried there. He didn't have to wait long; the shovel struck something hard about a half-foot down.

Colly bent over and brushed the dirt away. When he saw what was down there, he screamed. Staring up at him was a skull.

Except it wasn't. Bones didn't usually shine like silver, did they? Upon closer examination, Colly realized that it was a decoration attached to the front cover of a very thick, leather-bound book.

He reached into the hole and pulled out the book. There was no title, and when he flipped through the pages, he discovered half of it was written in Middle English (although he didn't know that; while he could read, the act itself was not his forte), and the other half in what could

have been Latin. He remembered looking in a Bible once and seeing words like this.

"I don't understand," Colly said. "What am I supposed to do, Jeremiah?"

His son held up two fingers, then one, then five. It took Colly a moment to realize Jeremiah meant page 215. He flipped through the pages again, this time more frantically. When he came to the page, he saw one big word that he didn't know: MANIFESTATION.

The Middle English part told of steps to take, circles to make, blood to let, spirits to get. When all of this was to be done, he was to speak the Latin-looking paragraph. Colly didn't comprehend all of it, but he could guess well enough.

"This book will bring you back to life?" he asked.

Jeremiah smiled, showing blood-streaked teeth, and nodded.

"Wait right here," Colly said. "I'm going to get the materials."

He grabbed his candle and ran through the woods back to his house. His son could come back to him! Things could go back to the way it was before! Sure, Gretchen was gone, but Jeremiah would be alive again!

Colly grabbed his hunting knife from next to his rifle and went in search of enough stones for the spell. Along the way, he managed to snag a field mouse that should be just right for his purposes.

When he returned to the old shack, Jeremiah was gone. Colly didn't think much of it, he just made the circle of stones on the dirt floor, and then used his knife to cut the mouse's head off and squeeze its blood out on the stones. Lastly, he drew the blade across the love line of his left palm. He grimaced as his blood seeped out to pool in the dirt at the center of the stones.

Colly looked at the book. He didn't know how to pronounce half the words, but he didn't care. All he could think about was seeing his son in the flesh again.

As it turned out, pronunciation came almost naturally, as if his mouth already knew how to form the words. Listening to his own voice, however, threw a fright into him. From church, he knew what Latin sounded like, and this certainly wasn't it. This language tasted more primitive as it crawled from between his lips.

When he reached the end, he realized he was shouting. The heavens shook and bellowed, which Colly thought was strange. Last he checked, the sky was cloudless.

Lightning tore what remained of the roof off the shack and struck the puddle of blood in the middle of the circle. Smoke gouted up, blowing out the candle.

Colly waited for the smoke to clear, begging God to have his son step out of the circle. He could see something moving in the haze, and his heart beat faster.

What stepped through the fog looked like Jeremiah, now with the hole in his head closed, but Colly knew it wasn't him. He couldn't tell how he knew, he just knew, like parents can always tell the difference between identical twins.

"You're not my son," Colly said.

The thing smiled razor teeth, and Colly could see something green moving inside its mouth.

A crack formed down the middle of its face, and its head split open like a flower blooming. Strands of slime stretched out across the gaping hole, and they split when the tentacles sprouted out like weeds. They flailed and flopped about, leaving gooey trails wherever they roamed. Two hands soon followed, claws pressing on either side of Jeremiah's head, pushing down. lowly, the skin sloughed away as if the thing was removing a tenacious article of clothing.

The empty husk of Jeremiah was tossed aside, and the mass of tentacles and eyes and claws allowed itself to spread out.

As Colly looked at the loose skin that had once looked like Jeremiah, he realized that he'd been tricked. He didn't know what this creature was, but it possessed a vast intelligence and a manipulative disposition. Had it tried to get

his son to use the book? Had it haunted him when he refused? Was this monstrosity the cause of Jeremiah's suicide?

He supposed he could have run, but what was the point? Something this horrendous would be too difficult to escape. Instead, he dropped the book and waited for his demise. He waited to be reunited with his family.

This was Colly's last thought as jagged teeth closed around the top of his head and pulled back. Half of his skull came away, pulling his eyes behind it like little tails. His mouth opened and closed several times, and his hands scrabbled in the mess of his head, but when the creature took its second bite, his body stopped moving.

* * *

As the thing ate Colly Storke, it thought about the war between brothers and knew it would be an easy world to take.

'Mardi Growl'

Shane McKenzie



Doug waited in the car as Brent paid for the rooms. A group of girls walked by and smiled at him. He rolled down the window.

"Hey, ladies. I got plenty of beads in here."

One of the girls lifted her shirt to reveal one breast. Doug tossed a cheap fifty cent bead necklace at her. The group of girls laughed as they walked away.

Doug couldn't wait for the night. He spent over a hundred bucks on beads, and he was determined to bring a girl back to his room. Things were looking good so far, saw a tit and hadn't even left the car yet. Brent walked from the lobby toward the car. He popped the trunk.

"You missed it, dude," said Doug, stepping out and stretching his body.

"What?"

"I already got some action. This is gonna be one hell of a night."

Brent smiled and banged fists with him. "Hell yeah."

They emptied the car and lugged their bags up the stairs and into their room. Brent pulled out a bottle of Jack Daniels.

"To both of us getting laid tonight!"

"Cheers!" Doug yelled as they clinked their shots together.

They took a few more drinks and lay on the beds. It had been a long car ride to New Orleans, and a good nap is what Doug needed. They had plenty of time to go out and get crazy. The sun was still up, and he wanted all the energy he could get. He closed his eyes and passed out.

Doug woke up to the sound of Brent's voice. His friend stood at the door, giggling and shuffling his feet. He turned his head and locked eyes with Doug. He waved him over to the door.

"Doug, this is Joanna. She is staying in the room next door."

Doug wiped the crust from his eyes and walked over. He hesitated at the sight of her. He didn't expect her to be so gorgeous. Her brown hair rested on her breasts, the cleavage nearly popping out of her shirt. She smiled at Doug and extended her hand.

"Hello, Doug. Nice to meet you."

"Yeah, you too."

Brent smiled at him, his eyebrows jumping up and down.

"I was just telling your friend that we could have a lot more fun staying here tonight." She ran her red fingernails through Brent's hair.

"Yeah, buddy. You're on your own tonight," he said, smiling at the girl.

"That's fucked up, man. We came all this way, and you're ditching me?"

"I don't mind if you stay, Doug," she said, licking her lips.

Brent furrowed his brow and threw his hands in the air. "Hell no! You're all mine, baby."

She laughed and rubbed Brent's neck. She looked at Doug from over Brent's shoulder and winked. "Are you sure you don't want to stay?"

"You guys have fun. I'm gonna try my luck on Bourbon Street."

"Suit yourself, Doug," she said and then locked lips with Brent.

Doug watched as their tongues wrestled. He felt jealous and pissed at his friend for blowing him off. On the other hand, if that were him, he would have done the same thing. Joanna was a complete knock out.

Brent closed the door and slammed his back against it. He put his hand over his heart and sighed.

"Okay, it's official. I'm in love."

"You lucky fucking bastard. I guess we picked the right hotel, huh?"

"You aint kidding. She just came and knocked on the door. I have no idea where she came from."

"Who cares? Go hit that!"

"You're not mad?"

Doug opened his suitcase and emptied his massive collection of beads. He smiled at Brent and picked up the biggest ones. They lit up like Christmas lights, the beads the size of oranges.

"Don't worry about me. These babies are gonna get me through the night."

Brent laughed and headed out the door.

Doug jumped in the shower and got changed. He didn't like the idea of running the streets in New Orleans alone, but he planned on having company as the night went on.

He placed the beads around his neck one at a time until he could barely turn his head. The amount of beads seemed much more ridiculous once they were on him.

"It's still gonna be one hell of a night."

He walked out of the room and locked the door. Laughter rang out from behind Joanna's door. He pounded on it and yelled his goodbye.

"He's busy!" Joanna's voice called back.

Doug smiled and shook his head as he walked away. He still couldn't believe his friend's luck.

Bourbon Street was only a few blocks away from the hotel, and people were everywhere. He stopped at a bar and ordered a drink. A beautiful woman dancing on the bar made her way toward him. She bent down and kissed him on the cheek, then lifted her shirt.

"I want the big ones," she said, running her finger across the lit up beads.

"Oh no. Those are for someone special."

"I'm not special?"

"You could be. That all depends."

She laughed and danced to the other side of the bar.

Doug walked outside, his head a bit fuzzy. A group of girls walked by and eyed the pile of beads around his neck.

"Beads, ladies?"

They lined up and flashed him simultaneously. He gave them all necklaces, but they all wanted the big flashy ones.

"What are you willing to do for them?"

"Nothing, we already showed you our fucking tits."

"And I already gave you fucking beads."

They strutted away, cussing as they disappeared into the crowd.

A large woman with a neck full of beads put her arm around him. The weight of her nearly caused him to tumble. She had clearly been drinking, and she whispered into his ear.

"I'll do anything you want for those beads, baby."

"No thank you, I'm good."

"What's the matter, baby?" she said as she lifted her shirt. Doug looked at the ground and held in his laugh.

"Thanks, here."

He tossed one of the cheap necklaces to the ground and walked away. He felt like he should have taken beads for having to see that shit.

He continued on his journey, handing out necklaces to willing females. The fancy ones stayed on his neck all

night. He had seen every shape and color of breast at that point, and started to get bored. He thought about Brent and how much fun he must be having. He almost wished he would have taken Joanna up on her offer.

He had been jumping from bar to bar, and his walk turned into a stumble. Sitting on the curb, he concentrated on not vomiting.

"You feeling all right?"

He looked up into the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen. The green color made him forget he was sick.

"I'm okay. Just taking a little break."

"It's crazy out here, isn't it?"

Doug stood up and got face to face with the beauty. She smiled and ran her hand across her chest. He stared, making no attempt to hide it.

"See something you like?"

"Sorry, I can't help it. You're gorgeous."

"You aint so bad yourself-"

"Doug. And your name?"

She laughed and stepped forward, her chest pressed against him. Her tongue slipped into his mouth. Doug pulled her close and gripped her back side.

"Wow. You sure are friendly."

"I really like those beads. Saving them for someone?"

"I've been waiting for a special girl. I think I just found her."

She rubbed his cheek with the back of her hand, staring into his eyes. He didn't know if he had ever seen a more beautiful girl. His stomach fluttered with anticipation.

"I think I got an idea. Follow me."

She grabbed his hand and pulled him down the street.

Brent's girl was hot, but nothing compared to this one. He studied her body as they weaved through the street and into an alley. His sweaty hand almost slipped from her grasp. She slammed him against the brick wall and licked his neck.

"Why don't you drop your pants, Doug."

"Are you serious? Right here in the alley?"

"Is there a problem?"

"Other than it smells like shit and puke, no. I have a room just a few blocks down."

She stood up and grabbed his neck. Her strength surprised him.

"I said drop your fucking pants, Doug."

She locked eyes with him and licked his chin.

"Okay, you got it."

He undid his belt and let his pants fall to his ankles. The breeze tickled his erection.

"Now close your eyes, baby."

Her strong hands gripped his thighs and he felt her lips wrap around him. He moaned and ran his fingers through her hair.

"You like that, baby?"

"Don't stop."

She went back to it and Doug tilted his head back.

A hot pain made his eyes burst open. He looked down to find her staring up at him. He felt her mouth working, yet she smiled at him. Her shirt was open and her stomach pressed against him.

"What the fuck!"

Her bare breasts had no nipples, just mounds of flesh. A gaping mouth opened in her stomach, long razor teeth protruding from the edges. The mouth moaned and chewed on him.

"You like that, baby?"

He kicked her away, blood running from the lips on her stomach. It growled at him as he backed away.

"What's the matter, Doug? Don't you want me?"

"Stay the fuck away!"

She edged forward, rubbing the blank mounds on her chest. She squeezed them together and posed for him. The mouth opened and closed, red drool oozing from between the teeth.

He looked down at his crotch and saw blood. He couldn't tell how bad it was but whimpered at the sight of it. Pulling up his pants, he backed away from the creature.

"I'm not finished with you!"

She lunged forward, the mouth growling and snapping its teeth. Doug caught her by the wrists. She moaned and licked her lips as she struggled to get closer. The gaping maw slammed open and shut, catching a piece of his shirt.

"I want you, Doug. I want you so bad."

He tried to kick her away, but his foot got caught between the teeth. His boot slipped off and the jaws chewed furiously. She backed away from him as the mouth finished its leathery meal and swallowed. She continued to pose, swirling her hips and gesturing with her finger.

"You stay back!"

She laughed and walked toward him. Her stomach snarled, a shoelace hanging from between its teeth.

He pulled the over sized beads from his neck. The lights flickered off the brick walls. Running at her, he slammed them into the mouth. The beads shattered as the teeth slammed shut. Doug took his chance and ran into the street. The creature roared behind him.

"You can't run, Doug!"

He burst into the crowd, pushing between bodies.

He moved as fast as he could, checking over his shoulder. His loins ached and he wondered what kind of damage had been done.

"Doug!"

Her voice sounded far, but not far enough. He turned the corner and saw his hotel in the distance. The act of running made him want to scream out in pain, but he pushed himself forward.

He sprinted up the stairs and jammed his hand in his pocket. The key wasn't there. It must have fallen out in the alley somewhere.

"Fuck!"

He looked over the balcony and saw her strolling along the street. She had her stomach covered again, sniffing the air. Her head twisted sideways and looked directly at him.

"Oh, God."

He banged on Joanna's door, yelling for Brent.

"Let me in! Brent, hurry!"

The door crept open, and Joanna's eye peered out. The door was open just enough for her to look out.

"Hello, Doug."

"Where's Brent? We gotta get outta here!"

"He's inside. Come on in."

Doug pushed the door open, shoving Joanna aside. The door slammed shut behind him. Blood covered the walls.

"W-what is going on?"

He turned to face Joanna. She rubbed her body against the wall, blood dripping from her naked body. The mouth on her stomach panted, a dark purple tongue hanging from between the teeth.

"Stay with me, Doug."

He backed away and tripped over something on the floor. He stumbled and crashed on his back. A pair of legs lay next to him, cut off at the thighs. He screamed and scrambled backward.

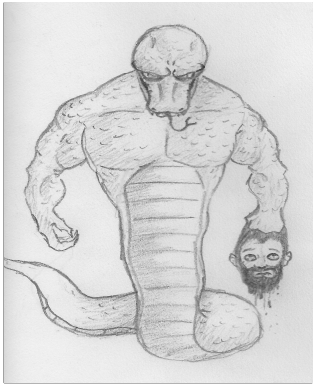
"Please don't hurt me."

Joanna got on all fours and crawled toward him. Her tongue ran across her red lips. Her stomach wheezed as she grew nearer.

"I want you, Doug. I want you inside of me."

'Returning to Eden'

Jameson T. Caine



A shotgun blast sounded in the late afternoon heat, stirring Don from his reverie. He looked up, gazed in the direction of the street and then shaking his head, returned to inspecting the mess around him.

"What was that?" Kathy asked him from her spot by the patio. In addition to knocking over half the rear fence, the unexpected storm that had swept through town earlier in the day had also torn off several dozen roof shingles, deposited innumerable leaves and small branches from nearby trees into their backyard and ripped up half his wife's prized rose bushes. In resigned disgust, she was busy pruning what the wind and rain had spared.

"That's just Cody across the street. He tends to get liquored up before he's got a lot of work to do around his place and once he does, he likes to take shots at any bird, squirrel or raccoon that makes the mistake of getting too close."

"I'm sure today's storm didn't help," she said.

He smiled to himself. "No, I imagine not. If his place is anything like ours, he probably downed an entire fifth of Jack Daniels before he even stepped outside." Another shot rang out, lending credence to his words.

"I feel sorry for Mary," Kathy said. "Poor thing, having to deal with such behavior just to get a decent amount of work out of her husband."

As if in conjunction with her sentiments, a woman's scream sounded in the distance. It was quickly followed by a series of shotgun blasts, then another scream from the house across the street.

Don and Kathy looked at each other, pausing in their work. "That didn't sound normal," she said.

"No, it didn't."

"I'm going to give them a call," she said, "just to make sure they're okay." She got up and crossed the yard to the kitchen door. He followed her inside and watched as she dialed Cody's number. Several long seconds elapsed before she hung it up. "No one is answering," she said.

Don made his way from the kitchen to the front room and peeked through the curtains at the house across the street. Like their own, Cody's house was set off from the roadway, surrounded by tall Pine trees and thick bushes. From this vantage point, Don could see no signs of movement or activity.

"Try them again," he called to Kathy. A few seconds later she reported that there was still no answer.

"I guess I better go see if they're alright," he said. Heading for the front door, he scooped up his cell phone from the charger station.

"Be careful," Kathy said.

"I will," he said, popping out the door.

He crossed the street slowly; enjoying the day's fading heat. The storm had been quite surprising, as the weather forecast had been for clear skies. The asphalt was littered with debris, requiring him to step over numerous fallen branches.

Reaching Cody's driveway, he halted. "Hey, Cody!" he called. "What are you up to?" There was no reply. He gazed up and down the street, but saw nothing.

Out here on this side of Potter Hill, the homes were spaced further apart, leading to a more rural look and feel, which suited Don just fine. He didn't like the cramped feeling of those new tract housing projects.

"Cody? Mary? Are you guys okay?" Again, no answer. He was beginning to get a bad feeling about the situation.

He started up the driveway, casting his eyes back and forth at the thick foliage on either side, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Approaching the house, he looked at each window, but nothing moved within. He stepped onto the porch and rang the doorbell. He waited a few seconds and then knocked hard on the door. Only silence greeted him. "Cody? Mary?" Something was surely wrong. Following the concrete path leading from the porch to the side of the house, he came to a tall wooden fence and gate. "Cody?" he called again, hoping his neighbor was in the backyard.

He reached for the latch on the gate but paused when he heard something on the other side. A strange noise, like compressed air leaking from a tire. "Cody?" he tried again, but the only response was the odd hissing, only now it was accompanied by the sound of movement, like something coarse being pulled across the wet pavement. It was coming closer.

He backed away from the fence, waiting. The gate failed to open, but something began clawing at the fence, the sound of sharp nails on wood reaching him. Apparently, a wild animal was loose in Cody's backyard. Had that been what his neighbor had fired at earlier? Not wishing to confront a dangerous animal unarmed, he returned to the front door and knocked again. This time after receiving no response, he tried the doorknob and found that it turned easily. Not surprising, since Potter Hill wasn't a town known for its crime. Out here on the outskirts, most people didn't bother locking their homes.

Easing the door open, he stepped inside and immediately saw the trail of blood leading up the nearby staircase. His heart suddenly racing, he called out again, this time his voice not much beyond a whisper. The house was still and silent, which only increased his apprehension.

He stepped back out onto the porch and removed his cell phone from his pocket. Quickly he dialed home and when Kathy answered, he told her what he'd found, instructing her to call the police. "You should come back and wait for them," she said.

"I know," he replied, "but Cody and Mary may be hurt or need help. I can't leave without checking on them."

"Okay, but for god's sake, Don, be careful."

"Always," he said before ending the call.

He went back inside and weighed his options. Ahead he could see into the kitchen and though most of that room lay beyond his sight, he spied the large picture window that overlooked the backyard. The blood led from the stairs in that direction and Don saw that the window's glass had been shattered, but before investigating there, he decided to look upstairs first.

He raised his foot and carefully placed it on the first step, a low creak the only response. Going slow, he ascended to the second floor, careful to not make too much noise. In addition to the blood, the stairs were covered with mud as well as something else. A clear, slimy substance that dripped from each step with the consistency of motor oil.

At the top he found himself at the end of the upstairs hall. A similar trail of blood, mud and slime led to the room at the far end. He advanced down the corridor, his eyes darting back and forth to the doors on either side. Nothing emerged from those rooms as he passed and within seconds he entered the master bedroom.

The place was a mess, mud and slime covering damn near everything. The door was badly scratched on the side facing the hall and from the way it hung at an angle, Don saw

that it had been forced open, coming loose from one of its hinges in the process.

Looking around the room, he spied a shotgun in the corner where it had been discarded. Spent shell casings dotted the room and the walls showed the tell tale signs of damage from buckshot. Despite the evident signs of a struggle, neither Cody nor Mary were to be seen. It seemed obvious that they had barricaded themselves in this room, Cody firing at their attacker when the door was breached. And then what had happened? Drunk or not, Cody couldn't possibly miss hitting something at such close range, yet there was no evidence of who or what had attacked them. Looking again at the trail of blood, mud and slime, Don concluded that his neighbors had been unwillingly taken away, most assuredly by force.

A loud crash from the floor below nearly caused his heart to stop. He froze, listening as the sound of frenzied movement reached him. It sounded like someone was tearing up the kitchen, knocking over chairs and breaking things. The ruckus stopped for an instant and he thought he heard that odd hissing noise again, but before he was certain, the symphony of crashes began anew. This time, he heard the sound of breaking glass and realized the large sliding glass door had been destroyed, allowing the intruder to escape into the backyard.

Hurrying to the window, he threw back the curtains and looked into the yard below. He saw that Cody had also lost part of his rear fence to the storm, the large bushes beyond clearly visible through the gap created by the collapsed portion. Movement caught his eye and when he looked closer he saw something long vanish into the brush. He'd only got a glimpse, but it had resembled the tail end of a gargantuan snake slipping under cover of the bushes.

The cell phone buzzed in his pocket, forcing him to stifle a startled yelp. The screen revealed that it was his home number calling.

"Hello?"

"Don?" came Kathy's nervous whisper.

"Kat, what's wrong?"

"Don, there's something outside, in the backyard."

His heart starting pounding again. "What is it?"

Her voice was unsteady and he could tell she was badly frightened. "I don't know. I just heard this hissing and then the sounds of the patio furniture being pushed around. I called out but got no answer."

Hissing? Now he was frightened as well.

"Ok, I'm on my way back, just hold on while..."

He was cut off by her abrupt scream. In the background he heard the sound of breaking glass. "Kathy? Kathy?"

"It's trying to get in!" his wife shrieked before the line went dead.

"Shit!" he spat, launching himself toward the door. He barreled along the hall, no longer concerned with stealth. Racing down the staircase, he slipped in a small pool of blood and slime as he approached the bottom. He went down hard, crashing into the wall at the foot of the stairs. He picked himself up and glancing towards the kitchen, stepped toward the front door.

He promptly halted when he saw movement. A dark shape stood in the kitchen and an instant later Don realized that the person was actually located outside in the backyard, their upper torso visible through the kitchen window. The figure turned to look at Don and an involuntary gasp escaped his lips.

An elongated face, like the pointed head of a reptile stared back at him with slitted yellow eyes. Hairless, the man was a dark green in color, his skin covered in scales. Snarling when he saw Don and exposing the large fangs in his mouth as well as a forked tongue, the man reached a thick, muscled arm into the window as if to pull himself inside. Don took a step back towards the door, ready to bolt.

Seeing Don on the verge of flight, the green man cocked his other arm and threw something large through the

window. Even before it struck Don in the chest, he knew what it was: a severed head. As it fell to the floor, he saw the thick heavy beard and bright blue eyes that belonged to Cody Williams. Offering up a scream of his own, he fled through the front door.

Charging down the driveway, he stumbled into the street at the same time a police cruiser rolled to a stop, the driver breaking hard to keep from hitting him. Inside he saw two cops, one already emerging from the passenger side as Don looked back over his shoulder.

"Hey, are you alright?" the officer asked. Don just looked at him and took a step toward his house, shocked into silence by what he'd just seen.

"Hold it there, pal," the officer said, seeing that Don had no intentions of stopping for a chat. His voice had taken on a firmer, authoritative tone.

"Holy shit!" The other cop jumped from the car and drew his gun, but Don saw that he wasn't pointing the weapon at him, but rather, towards Cody's house. All eyes turned in that direction and Don saw the green, scaly man coming down the driveway in their direction. Only, he wasn't a man.

The top half of the creature was generally humanoid in appearance except for the green-scaled flesh and pointed face Don had noticed a moment earlier. However, from the waist down, he saw that the thing was nothing more than a giant serpent, a long body tapering to a barb-tipped point. The monster reminded Don of a centaur, but rather than half horse, this thing was half snake.

A loud crack made Don jump. The second officer was firing at the creature as it glided towards them. Several more shots sounded, but the thing showed no signs of injury. With a hiss, its head jerked forward and it spat a large wad of thick saliva at the nearest cop, striking him in the eyes. The man dropped his gun and clutched at his face, screaming horribly before falling to the ground and convulsing. In seconds he was still.

Like lightning, the Snake Man surged forward, its long tail propelling it across the concrete. Reaching out with taloned claws, it picked up the fallen officer and slung him over its shoulder. Turning, it began to slither its way back towards Cody's house.

More shots rang out and Don turned to see the surviving cop firing at something down the street. Looking, he saw three more of the Snake Men emerging from the trees and heading in their direction, thick trails of slime left in their wake. Remembering Kathy, Don looked at the officer. "Inside! We need to get inside." He was already in motion towards his house.

The officer ignored him and continued to fire. Don ran until and was in his own driveway before he looked back. The officer had expended his rounds. He reached into the cruiser and withdrew a shotgun. Leveling it at the closest Snake Man, he fired. The creature went down, but came right back up and Don saw that its thick scales had protected it, falling only from the force of the impact.

Rising up, it spat at the cop, but he was ready for it, ducking down behind the cruiser to avoid being hit by the paralyzing venom. Closer the beast came and the officer stood to fire again. The Snake Man abruptly turned and flexed its body, the long tail shooting forward and impaling the cop in the neck with its barbed tip. He pawed at his throat as the Snake Man curled its body, closing within arm's reach of the flailing officer. Don turned away when he saw those hideous claws rip into the man's chest and abdomen, the wet sounds of tearing flesh and the officer's agonized screams echoing along the street.

More Snake Men slid into view, sparking Don to run for his front door. He slammed into it hard, desperately twisting the doorknob, but it was locked. He reached for his keys, but remembered that he hadn't taken them with him, relying on Kathy to open the door upon his return. Pounding on the door in frustration, he stiffened when he heard a loud hiss directly behind him.

He turned and saw one of the monsters eyeing him, its forked tongue flickering between huge slavering jaws. Expecting the monster to spit venom, he shielded his eyes with his arm, but no such attack was forthcoming. It seemed the beast was content to rip him apart with its claws.

The door opened behind him and Kathy's voice broke the stillness of the moment. "Get down, Don!" she screamed. Acting on instinct, he dropped to the ground, a cold spray arcing over his head to hit the Snake Man. With a high-pitched squeal, the beast turned and fled.

A hand grabbed Don by the arm and hoisted him to his feet. He looked in shock at his wife, who was wielding a large fire extinguisher. "One of those things nearly got inside," she told him. "Then I remembered that snakes are cold blooded animals and don't take well to cool temperatures. One shot in the face from this sucker and that bastard was on the run."

"They got Cody and Mary," he told her, "and the cops."

"Let's not stick around here and join them. C'mon." Leading the way, she ran to their car, occasionally aiming and firing the extinguisher in the general direction of the Snake Men. They both piled into the vehicle and Don saw that she had the state of mind to bring along the car keys. As they pulled from the driveway, a sudden downpour of rain began to fall, heralding another unexpected storm.

A Snake Man tried to block their escape, but Kathy floored the gas pedal, steering directly at the creature. With a wet smack the car struck it, sending it soaring through the rain to land in a bloody mess in front of the police cruiser. "That's it, we're outta here," Kathy said, maneuvering the car down the street and away from the carnage.

"What are we gonna tell people?" Don asked. "The cops are gonna want to know what killed Cody and Mary, not to mention their officers. I doubt us babbling about Snake Men is gonna do us any good."

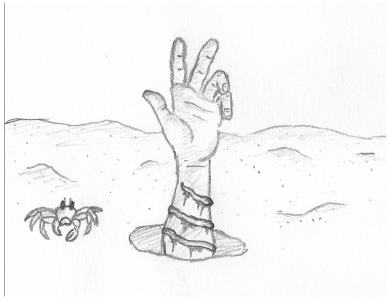
"We'll think of something," she said.

An hour later when the second storm had subsided, they returned with more police to find that no sign of Cody, Mary or the first two police officers remained. Of the Snake Men, the only evidence of their visitation was the trails of slime that led deep into the forest.

Not to mention the shocking footage captured by the dashboard camera in the first police cruiser.

'Beachcomber'

Kevin White



The Trenton 350 metal detector emitted a steady, static filled hum as Walter passing it back and forth across the dew covered sand. The sun was just coming up and the tide had pulled far back on the beach like skin exposing patches of rock. Overhead gulls circled, waiting to see if the lone figure would turn up any food as he occasionally stopped and dug in the sand with a small shovel.

"Not much luck today," he said to himself. A bottle cap, a few metal buttons and a nickel.

Not exactly buried treasure. Walter knew what a person *could* find doing this. He fingered the necklace under his plaid shirt until he felt the simple, solid gold wedding band.

"To Nancy with Love-1948" the inscription read. Walter's own try at marriage had not gone very smoothly and he had long ago lost the tan line where his ring used to be.

"Six years of pure hell," he said out loud. Yet Marge had been the one who suggested that he get out and exercise. He spent ten hours a day behind a desk and over the years had managed to pack on a few pounds. He wasn't into sports and could never justify the expense of a gym membership. However, a leisurely stroll with the chance of finding something valuable, *that* was something he could get into.

The hum of the detector changed pitch slightly but Walter did not stop to dig. The tone suggested something metallic but too small to bother with. He was moving steadily towards an exposed cluster of rock. If he didn't know better, he would have thought he was following a constant trail of minute debris. Walter watched a half dozen gulls pick at the sand where he had been. The sun was getting higher and soon other people would be out walking. The beach condo he had rented for the weekend was full and he had no wish to be out when the crowds descended.

Walter walked around the cluster of rocks swishing the metal detector back and forth like a broom. The sand was very damp here and each step caused him to sink a little. In several places he dug shallow holes but came up with nothing more than small bits of unidentifiable metal.

The back of his shoes felt suddenly cold and damp. Walter turned quickly and looked down. A small wave washed over his feet. "Damn," he swore. The tide was beginning to come back in.

On impulse, he began to climb up the exposed rock. It was only a couple of feet off the surface. The reddish, black protrusion was dotted with acne like barnacles and patches of blue-gray mussels entangled in bits of seaweed.

Walter removed the headset and switched off the metal detector's power. From his new vantage point, he could see the tide was definitely coming back in. He surveyed the beach and still saw no one about.

The top of the exposed rock seemed to hold nothing of interest, just a pool of water and some drift wood. The smell of damp rot assailed his nostrils. Turning his head from the odor, he caught a brief glimpse of something shining in the pool.

Walter laid the metal detector down and crouched on his haunches. The pool was perhaps three feet across and a little over a foot deep. He could see a number of green, anemone like creatures clinging to the rock below the pool's surface along with an orange sea urchin about the size of his

palm. As he looked closer, Walter thought he could not remember seeing an urchin of that size or color before. Turning his attention to the floor of the pool, he noticed it was littered with fine debris, pulverized shell fragments and other unrecognizable bits.

Reaching into the pool, Walter swished his hand near the bottom where he had seen the glint of metal. Soon he was rewarded with a silver dollar sized object covered in muck. Walter shook it in the water and pulled it up.

"A Rolex," he said with a smile. The face was cracked and the band was missing. He moved his thumb over the surface to remove more sediment. Water had seeped inside but he noticed tiny diamond chips at each of the hour marks. The watch was ruined but those little gems could make it worth keeping.

As he shifted to stand, Walter noticed the urchin again. The top of it was now black with a thin band of white all around. He put the watch in his shirt pocket and leaned forward.

The *urchin* blinked.

With a gasp, Walter stumbled backward, lost his footing, and landed hard on his ass. He rolled sideways and scrambled to his feet on the slick surface. A burning sensation flared in his calf then another lanced his thigh. He cried out in pain. Dropping back to his knees, his legs began to feel numb and he saw the *anemones* were now elongated and attached to his leg. The small green tentacles shot out like harpoons, lancing his other thigh and lower back. Walter opened his mouth to scream but his mind was already clouding and his eyelids began to sag.

Several more piercing stings followed and then a sharp, coordinated tug. With a chocking gurgle, he fell backwards into the pool. Walter's chest felt tight and his lungs burned as if the air he inhaled was a white, hot flame. Swirling blackness submerged his mind as he disappeared beneath the layers of muck at the pool's bottom, now filled with rows of sharp, grinding teeth.

By the time the first morning beach walkers arrived, the tide had rolled back up on the beach like the covers of a freshly made bed and the seagulls had retreated out to sea looking for eatable debris. The remaining sand was a pristine yellowish white, not yet marred by the passage of human feet.

Out in the surf, a patch of water bubbled briefly before dispersing some rust colored foam. Under the gentle waves was a rock formation and in the pool of that formation was a necklace with a solid gold ring inscribed: "To Nancy with love-1948."

'The Thought Things'

Jeff Skinner



Darren McCauley left his apartment for the supermarket, clamoring down the rust-iron stairs to a world he despised. He didn't like the outside world, didn't appreciate the cruelty. "Time is the darkness, the devil, the adversary," he mumbled.

After thirty years as a talk show host, he retired with little money and callous pessimism. Less than a year ago, the company he worked for went bankrupt. He tried his best to keep his pension, but after a long battle, surrendered to social security. His life was a study in metaphysics and parapsychology. He had interviewed every celebrity for the last thirty years. There were priests, gurus, scientists, and physicians – all who respected his opinion – all who adored his program.

As he walked through the entrance of Judson Tobacco, the owner smiled. "Well, Mr. McCauley. I just got some new Thompson cigars -- fresh as a spring day."

The warped floorboards creaked as he steadied his feet. "Great. I'll have a box."

"You know, I really miss your late night program. Your program scared the hell out me. You could instill fear like no other broadcaster. Remember when you told everyone that the ice age was on its - "

"Yes, I remember. Well, I'm not in the radio scene anymore -- nor do I care much about it. I'm turning seventy in a few days."

"Well, happy birthday. That's if I don't see you until then." The clerk adjusted his tie, then closed the display case. "Remember the lady who jumped from the window after hearing the storm was on its way?"

Darren nodded. In the corner of his eye, he saw a golf-ball size creature spiral out of the man's head. It was as black as tar with tiny wings and four reptilian-like arms. The eyes were as large and slanted as the nose. There was red hair on its chest, along with dozens of bleeding moles.

"What in the hell!" he shuddered.

The clerk lifted his brows. "What's wrong?" After flying around the room, the tiny creature disappeared.

"Nothing … just a bit tired."

"Have a great day, Mr. McCauley," the clerk said. He clapped his hands, adjusted his blue smock, and then got back to work.

Before he left the store, he turned and glanced at the clerk. He wondered if the man was as lonely as the world around him. For the last few decades, he wanted to ask him why he had never married, why he had never gone to school, why he took such a simple job. But before he could say a word, the door shut behind him.

Walking down the cluttered street, whirling his iron cane, he lit up a cigar. The smoke filled the air, wreaths of gray haze, rising and disappearing among beams of sunlight.

When he entered the grocery store, a dozen customers sat in the vestibule drinking coffee.

They all glanced up to him and smiled -- proud of the fears he had embedded through the years. He was the celebrity of the city, the voice of entertainment.

He gathered his food in a small red basket and filled it with cheese, meat, and beverage. The owner, an Indian man with craggy features, stood stealthily in the upper office. He watched the customers like a bird watching its young, looking for gestures and expressions to confirm his hard work.

As he waited in the express-lane, an elderly woman coughed: "Well, Mr. McCauley. Really miss your program. Too bad they took it off the air."

"Well, to be honest, I was retiring anyway. I didn't like my program -- not at all."

"Well, I thought it was interesting -- very interesting. Hey, you remember when you said a virus had been released in the Midwest? Wow … that really scared the daylights out of me!"

Darren nodded his head.

Something moved in the silent, dry air.

It was the same creature he had seen at the tobacco store.

As he glanced at her tattered, gray hair, another creature fluttered out of her head. It soared over to the other one and began to dance around.

"My lord," he said. "Do you see them?"

The woman tuned around. "See what?"

"They were just there. They disappeared the minute you looked at them. There were two." He paused. "Wait. They're flying around."

The creature shifted from left to right. The larger creature's eyes seemed to be in harmony with the other's movements, teasing … playing.

The two creatures began to ram into each other. They continued until they became one – now the size of a baseball.

He watched the thing spiral around until it disappeared.

Lowering his eyes, he turned to the checkout girl and silenced. His battered nerves could be seen through his bagged eyes.

He left the store, quickly.

Approaching the old apartment complex, he stepped up the stairs to his rundown apartment. His door was chipped and slanted. The underlet hallway was populated with crashed-out drunks and puddles of urine.

The door squeaked open.

His apartment was packed wall to wall with old furniture. The ceiling had yellowed stains from cigar smoke and failed plumbing. There were nail holes penetrating light through stained covered plywood.

Strewn around the apartment were photographs of his diseased wife. He wanted to hide them in the closet, but couldn't. At night, he would imagine her voice speaking softly through the midnight hours.

As he sat there, he tried to forget the smell of her hair, the touch of her hands, the way she giggled, the long vacations, the way she made love, and the endless nights filled with conversation. It was useless.

Slumping into his chair, a cup of tea in his hand, he turned the station to the local news. All that was broadcasting was hatred, crime, molestation, murder, espionage, and natural disasters. He turned off the TV.

Glancing around the room, he felt as though the creature was watching. He didn't see the creature, didn't see anything but his shadow, but there was something … moving.

A knock came from the door.

It was Nurse Kempner.

Because of his diabetes, Medicare paid for a nurse. She was a brawny, dark haired woman. Her uniform looked as though she had just butchered a cow. "How's your day been?"

"Thought things," he replied. "I think you might want to change my medicine. I'm starting to see things."

"What are you seeing?"

"Things, monsters, creatures … coming out of people's heads!" He turned the radio to a classical station.

"Oh, you're just tired." She laughed, then took his pulse. "Honey, I think you might need something to make you sleep."

"I'm sleeping fine. Maybe it's just my imagination."

After she administered a shot, she packed her gear into a black bag. "I'll see you tomorrow. Try to quit smoking those horrid cigars. Okay?"

"They're the only thing … I enjoy."

"Boy, it's hot in here." She walked over and opened the window, then walked through the door. The hot breeze retreated as the door closed behind her.

He rummaged through some books he had collected through the years. As he did this, he found a tattered novel of significance. It was a book dismissed by the critics as simply the vagaries of an intoxicated mind. He opened the book and started thumbing through the pages. He found a paragraph of interest:

Everything on earth had its beginning in either God's mind or man. All those who have visualized their thoughts strongly have been able to manifest them into form. The connection of thought and matter is extremely delicate. If you try to dissolve a statue by the power of thought, the statue is still there. That's because it was materialized by someone's previous thought. The thought of a disaster or catastrophe can be manifested by someone's fear. If you think that you are sick, you will get sick. Negative thoughts will manifest themselves into destruction. For example, when there is a war, the negative thoughts travel through the world to cause plagues, earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes. The thoughts literally swarm together and grow to a larger scale.

The whole thing fitted perfectly in his brain like tiny squares in a puzzle. Although it did make sense, he didn't believe a word. He took the book and threw it against the wall.

He sat for the remaining evening thinking about fear. Could a thought manifest itself into a living entity? Was thought truly a manifestation of matter? What does a thought look like? If it's an evil thought, would it manifest itself … horrendously?

Again he saw the creature, hovering by an old desk lamp. If this were insanity, he wasn't sure if he wanted to live. He'd rather slip away from cancer than to a life of unrelenting dementia. He grabbed a book and flung it at the creature, but missed.

"Damn you -- whatever you are. Go away!" he screamed.

As if by magnetism, the creature lifted its reptilian-like arms. Its wings extended like a vulture stalking its prey -- inhuman, alien, a thing from Hell. It retreated back to its original position, then disappeared.

Darren sat for the remainder of the evening with wide-eyes. He fell asleep with the lights on and the music blaring.

* * *

At six in the morning, Darren awoke to the sound of morning traffic. He was starting to feel a twinge of guilt, a sense of reverse pride from the fears he had inserted through the years. All of his memories ran through his mind at once, all filled with catastrophe and mayhem.

He glanced out to a day of uncertainty interlaced around a coat of fear. The sun was a golden hue with opaque clouds shaped like ships over a sea.

When he walked outside, the sun's rays blinded him. Finally, his vision returned to see a postal worker walking up the street. He was green-eyed and deathly pale. "Well, Mr. McCauley. How are you today?"

Darren stood frozen. "I'm fine -- heading to the park to get some sunshine." He waved his cane and looked at the mail in the man's hand. "I hope it's not all bills, today. The way this world is now – commercialism, promotions -- sell, sell, sell!"

"So, how do you like retirement?" the mail carrier asked.

"How do you like boredom?"

He laughed, then handed Darren his mail. "I'll never forget the time you told everyone there were aliens changing the weather."

"I remember. And that's probably the truth."

He glanced around the man's head, but saw nothing. *Maybe it's over,* he thought. *Maybe just my imagination.*

"Hey, remember the time you said the sun was about to exploded? That scared the daylight out of me!"

Two of the creatures shot out of the man's skull. They flew around until a larger one materialized. Abruptly, the larger one grabbed the other two and shoved them into its chest. It was as if it were feeding…

Darren backed up, shivered, and glanced into the creature's eyes. "Wait. Can you see that?" he asked, pointing his cane to the creature.

The man turned and looked, but the creature had vanished. "Nope, don't see a thing."

Darren pressed his palm to his head. "It was there a second ago."

"Have a great day," the man said, then got on his way.

As he walked toward the park, a dozen pigeons lunged from the sky. They were as large as vultures with prying eyes and cocky gestures. They dropped some crap on his head and flew away.

Darren scowled. He wiped the droppings off and walked up to a park bench.

As he sat there, he watched the sun turn a tart yellow. A breeze ran along the hills, whispering through oaks, evergreens, and elms.

He hoped he wouldn't be noticed.

"Well, if it isn't Darren McCauley," a man said. "I enjoyed your show. I'll never forget the time -"

"I don't want to hear about it!" he gasped. "I've been hearing enough about the damn show all week."

"I remember the time you said the world was completely out of oil! That really -"

"I said -- I don't want to hear about it!"

A slimy, hairy creature swarmed out of the man's head.

Darren took his cane and swung it in the air.

"The big one will be here shortly!" Darren scoffed.

The man gave him a crazy look.

Darren watched the larger creature devour the smaller one. Then, a second later, they disappeared. "If you don't mind, I would like to be left alone."

"Okay, Mr. McCauley. I'll be on my way."

He watched the man walk away, angrily.

After a few hours of sunshine, he returned home to find his nurse waiting in the vestibule.

She had a concerned look on her face. "I was wondering what happened to you -- thought maybe you got hurt," she said reflexively.

"I was at the park, as I am, this time every day."

"Well, it's time for your injection," she said, following him.

He opened the door and sat down on his favorite chair. "I'm still seeing things. Horrid creatures!"

"Honey, this medicine will not cause you to hallucinate. It must be your active imagination. I've listened to your program. -- boy do you have an imagination."

"Well, my dear. This is not my imagination. I saw more of those creatures, and now -- the big one -- is getting bigger."

"Well, I hope they don't raise your blood pressure -- because yours is skyrocketed." She walked over to the kitchenette to wash her hands. "I've got to get to another patient, so you relax, watch television, and get something to eat."

She ran out the door as if she were running from a pack of wolves. Her messy, dyed–red hair shimmered from the hallway lights.

Somewhere around midnight, dressed in his red pajamas and leather slippers, he picked up the book from the previous night and started to read:

Human beings are aware of thoughts issued by other human beings. A room where a man lives is flooded with his thought vibrations. These vibrations can be detected by others if they have the sensitivity. There have been cases that the thoughts of another were actually seen and felt by a sensitive mind. Therefore, a man who is conscious of his mind may not be conscious of his body. His thoughts will materialize if he has the ability to understand the difference between matter and spirit.

He threw the book out the window.

"Let the bums read it!" he hollered.

Sitting back in his chair, he reflected on the day.

He turned on the TV. A tornado had hit a small town in Oklahoma -- killing twenty people. He threw the remote at the television.

Lying on his bed, he began to think of all the terrors of the world. Thousands of thoughts entered his mind. He recalled the catastrophes through the years with intense concentration. There were so many horrors, so many catastrophes, his mind felt as though it was bleeding. All the havoc slammed through his mind like a freight train.

Staring at the ceiling, a swarm of creatures fluttered out of his head. He ran to the other side of the room.

They continued to soar … hundreds …

They were tiny, hairy, slimy, and stinky. They were on the floor, on the ceiling, on the walls.

They pierced the fabric of the world -- they were everywhere. Their angled eyes shifted around the room. They were looking for something to fulfill their desires.

They wiggled into the larger creature, squirming in like sperm to an egg. The creature was now the size of an obese man. Its wings sprawled, its teeth gnashed, and its arms grew … A creature so disgusting, his stomach turned. "*Must eat,"* it said.

They shifted, slithered … merged.

He ran over to the kitchen counter and grabbed a knife. The creature could not follow -- it was too large.

Turning around, he slashed the knife forward, but missed. The creature grabbed the knife out of his hand, then threw him to the floor. A yellow puss rained down upon his face. The rapid beating of the creature's wings echoed …

He screamed.

Now the size of a giant, the creature advanced towards him. A stream of white fluid dripped from its fangs. There was an offensive odor, putrid and vile.

He rolled to his right, knocking over the kitchen table.

The creature tilted its head, confused. It was as if it had never encountered matter.

Getting up, he started for the front door, but it was too fast. It grabbed his arms and threw him against a wall, then spewed a white liquid over his legs -- dissolving them upon contact.

Dabbing the liquid into its proboscis, it began to suck up the liquid. *"Must eat* …"

Darren was shock-silent. The pain was intense.

The creature screeched and shot liquid over his face and body, covering him completely.

It ate him entirely, leaving only white slime. It hovered, and then disappeared.

* * *

At seven in the morning, Nurse Kempner walked up to Darren's apartment. She knocked, but there was no answer. She pulled out a key and unlocked the door.

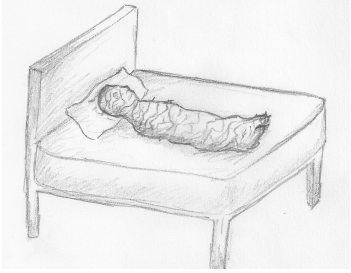
The place was trashed.

She looked around and called his name. When she walked to the corner of the room, she glanced down to a white substance. In the substance, along with coarse gray hair, lay a few of Darren's rings.

Behind her, something moved. *"Must eat,"* it said.

'Mine'

C.A. Dawson



The night gave Sara pause in her restless sleep. Every sleepless night previewed coming events mixed with the devastation of the previous days.

It had already begun. People were being erased everywhere around the world. Sara felt she had stumbled into some kind of *Left Behind* sequence. Every time someone left the room, she could not help but think they may never return. It was unnerving and wearing on her. It was not that the bodies piled up as a reminder of death, but the emptiness, the void of life surrounding her every step.

At some point, she stopped going into the city to work; there was not anyone left to work with or for, or to pay her. What was the point? The stores were void of workers and bare of supplies. Looting ended long ago. There were not many left so the need to steal diminished and the urgency disappeared along with the people. All had balanced out so-to-say.

The sky became grayer over the last month but not so as the sun could not filter through. Thank God, she had solar panels on the mountain. As long as she had sunlight of some degree, she would be okay. All phones and other lines of communication were dead. Television stopped broadcasting except intermittingly from some local public broadcasting

station at a nearby college. Some of the students had barricade themselves in the college as if it would make a difference, as if they would be safe anywhere. No one knew what was out there.

* * *

The hammer on the wind-up clock beat the light into the slits of her eyes as she lay there. She struggled to sleep in. It was just another Saturday, one of three, before the vacation she planned months ago, but who knew? Who could have known?

Slowly she sat up and weighed the dizziness in her head from the night before, then placed her feet solid, in front of her, on the cold floor. There were flashes throughout the night, similar to that of a camera flash. She held onto the side of the bed while memories of the night trickled through her mind. Memories of the night walking with Jake through town and the market place where she used to work. The smell of the flowers, the noise of the other shoppers, and general bustling movement of people, the sound of people; what she missed most. In her sleep, she cried out. Other times, small shallow laughs followed by whimpers, then tears.

'*Way to go Sara,' she thought. "Another drunken New Years Eve wasted,"* she said aloud preparing to wash her face at the kitchen sink. Her water well was limited but she found a charm in the inconvenient ways of the old farmhouse, in good weather that is. It had its downside like when it rained really or on dark cloudy days, which meant dark nights. If you wanted water in the bathroom to take a bath, you would have to take it there yourself. Otherwise, she used the outside shower. Sara preferred country charm, to city convenience.

Sergeant, her German Sheppard lunged up to greet her giving her face a pre-wash with his tongue. She walked around the farmhouse in her sleeveless pink t-shirt and panties and tried to put the night together. She remembered

running up the mountain with Jake, drunk in the pouring rain. That would explain her damp hair but not her near nakedness. She rustled her fingertips through her hair to assist in its drying when something bolted past her range of view to the left, outside the kitchen window. Then a long howl, shrill enough to embed in her ears and erased hovering memories of the night. She dropped her toothbrush to the rocked floor and reached for the one of the support beams in the middle of the room. She hurried to place her arms around it to steady herself. The sensation she felt was the same as if a huge branch was brushing up against the side of the house.

The ground moved beneath her at the same time yet there was no sense of fear, just the annoyance of the shrill noise, which shredded her fuzzy brain. The dog whimpered and lay low to the floor in a subdued growl. These sounds had become more frequent in recent months and Sara wondered what their significance meant, with its increased presence. It stopped.

A cloud appeared in the sky and loomed over the city below where she worked at the market seaside, three days a week before the gray ones came. She did not know anyone who had seen one but it was rumored they were hideous. They had taken over the city as it reported on TV at Jakes, when there was electricity. It was forty-eight miles round trip but took about an hour each way. It was all mountainous twisting up and down the narrow mountain roads. Sara walked outside to bring in water for a bath, stopped to admire the sky and noticed time was short. She had to hurry.

There was an ominous grayness about the day unlike before, before the flashes last night. The bird's presence disappeared altogether in an inaudible hush except for a few drifting feathers. A rainbow streamed in the distance and Sara knew the rains were coming. Even the snakes headed for cover. It was an urgent sign but of what?

Behind her, there were traces of blood along the path to the house on the ground cover, and boot prints, probably Jake's, but she was too intent on the sky to care. Sara overturned the barrels to catch the rainwater and hurried her buckets back into the house.

She entered the house and went for the radio to see if Jake was on the mountain and if he knew anything about the coming storm. There was no connection, not even static. The batteries drained empty.

The dog whimpered briefly, then again, howls and the sense that the house itself were folding over on its side. Covering her ears, she saw a gray figure staring at her from the outside near the tree. There was a flash inside her head when their eyes met and Sara could no longer hear the howling, but the increased pressure of the house moving. She looked more closely and it appeared to be wrapped in something or bandaged. Perhaps it was a…, then she paused. She had no idea as if her brain suddenly void of thought. When the howling stopped, she stared out the window but saw nothing. Feeling a bit uneasy, she grabbed Sgt.'s leash and headed out to Jake's place about a quarter mile down the path.

The screen door slammed and they were on their way. Occasionally they stopped. Sara thought she heard something behind them. The flash became more frequent in her head. Sergeant barked a few times into the direction of the outer woods. When they approached Jake's house everything was still.

"Jake, hello? Anybody home?" she cried out but there was nothing but silence. Another flash but this time an image of her in bed with Jake. It was so vivid she had to catch herself on the banister as she reached for the door. Sara turned the corner of the cabin to the bedroom and then she saw him lying on the bed, stiff and mummified, almost cocooned. His cat came out from under the bed covered in a stringy gauze web-like stuff streaming from its back.

"What the hell! Jake, can you hear me? Hang on I'll get you out of there," she said as she began to unwrap him.

She pulled the material from his mouth and nose as fast as she could. His lips moved.

"Run Sara, run. Save yourself. They are here," he gasped.

"Oh God, Jake. Who's here. Jake!" She attempted to pull the wrapping off him, his entire body imploded in a huge puff of gray flakey dust. Her dog barked continuously then the cat hissed and ran off. Whatever it was, it sealed her orifices immediately. Now she could barely breathe, see, or hear. Sara felt suffocated.

A shadow moved again in the background. Sara went into the next room writhing toward the vibrations, following the moving shape then there were two, then three of them. One of them approached her and held her tight. Her arms were in fixed positions and she could not free herself from the shadow. Jake's radio scrambled for a few seconds then went silent. Her dog ran for the shadow but could not match the shadows force and fell to the floor. The cat watched from under the bed.

Sara tried to run, blindly for the radio hoping someone was there, that someone knew what was happening, and that someone might be able to save her up on the mountain. While she ran, one of the shadows grabbed her jacket. Then the shadow spoke. Sara stopped and turned around.

"Let her go. She's the last one. There is no one left to help her." The smaller one looked for direction from the others.

Sara terrified at the sound of their voices began to calm herself from within. She pulled at the covering off her eyes and mouth. She tried to get out of the house, ran into the kitchen wall, and fell down. Her equilibrium was out of control, she struggled to stand, then she saw them. They were hideous. Gaping eye sockets void of tissue or eyes. Their mouths, filled with squirming maggots and their noses

suppressed vacant cavities. The maggots became more agitated when the shadows spoke. Now she felt ill. There was flashing in her head and the room began to spin out of control. Her stomach wrenched but she could not vomit. Sara lay on the floor gasping for air looking at the shapes before her. Sara froze slightly above the floor, suspended in motion, listening.

"We are leaving now," one of them said to her. "We will be back for the one inside you. You will need each other to survive this world."

Her eyes widened and looked away from them trying to process what she heard. Her eyes closed shut. Her arms loosened, fell to her sides and the pressure was gone. She then regained all of her human senses and few more she would discover on her own as the months passed.

"What do you mean you need it? It? What is it? What have you done to me? Who are you and what happened to Jake?" She scooted herself back into the corner out of their reach.

"You are the last one and the one growing inside you. Paradise restored and you are responsible as to what happens to you here on. It is the end and the beginning. We will be watching." The three or four of them turned their disgusting faces inward, lifted their arms upward and vanished before her eyes. Small gray feathers trailed downward and filtered in the sunlight re-emerging from the window.

Sara knew she would not be alone for long and the fear left her just as the birds regained their chatter. There was a flash and Sara grabbed her side. It was a debilitating pain and she fell to the side towards the wall. She heard this little voice inside her mind.

"We are alone here for now. Protect me and I will protect you. Be my mother now and I will be your son, forever. I am yours dear mother and you are mine. Trust only in me." The intensity of the flash within her head dimmed with each word he whispered.

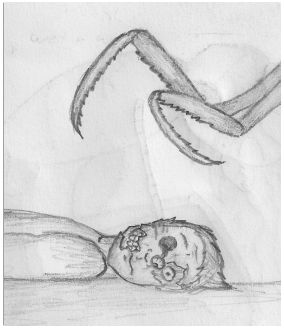
Sara felt him reposition himself, feeding off her and knew. It was then the terror diminished and survival set in.

Sara thought about what he would look like. *Would he look human or like the creatures*, she thought. Her arms wrapped around her stomach in a soft, fearful embrace, then she walked toward the comfort of the sunlight by the window.

"I will call you Mine," she uttered. A small bird landed on the windowsill. It held a lone squirming maggot in its beak. There was a flash in its eye, and then it threw its head back, and swallowed.

'Wet 'N' Wild'

William Wood



Lexa grabbed the back of his neck pulled their faces together. She felt him struggle, more from surprise than lack of interest, and then relax into the kiss. He was bigger and stronger, so he could get away any time but she knew he didn't want that. She was the best he'd ever had. He was a pretty thing, too, but book smart unfortunately. Not the most fun of her conquests, but he'd grown on her over the last few months.

He groaned, finally getting into it. So she bit him.

He hopped backwards, throwing both arms up, almost yanking her from the brick wall she sat on before she could let go. "What are you, a freaking vampire?" He touched his lip gingerly and flinched when he found the nick.

Lexa smiled. "Don't be such a pussy, Den."

Even in the low, night shift lighting, she saw he was having none of her taunting humor tonight. His expression slackened, eyes going all puppy-dog big, pained. He shook his head and stalked off down the curving walkway.

Something tickled her arm and she swatted a mosquito, smearing blood down her arm. Her body convulsed, not from the blood, but from the spindly alien

thing that had been sucking her blood. Eating her. She shivered again. God, she hated bugs. Almost as much as she *enjoyed* tormenting Den.

She watched as he disappeared between a fresh-squeezed lemonade kiosk and the turnstile entrance to the SuperLuge of Doom. He hadn't complained two nights ago when she'd lured him off under the guise of watching the meteor shower between rounds. Now he was going to be all Mister Offended when she was just trying to have a little fun.

She sighed, hopped down and jogged to catch up to him. "Hey, I was just fucking with ya."

He didn't slow his pace, but looked in her direction. A streetlamp behind him kept her from seeing his expression but irritation tinged his. "You can be such a…"

Yeah, say it, pussy.

"Mean person some times."

She stifled a laugh, about to insult his manhood when he pulled the walkie-talkie from his belt and keyed it. She covered the speaker of her own radio to stop the feedback squeal.

"Rich, you copy?"

Rich was their third team member. Lexa didn't understand why management thought they needed three people to walk around all night. Completely lame. *One* person could sit on their ass and watch monitors all night. Truth was, most nights, after they'd made a round or two, Rich would do just that in the security office, watching a DVD or streaming TV on his laptop while she and pretty boy slipped off for some private time. It was a good system and she was always pleased until payday rolled around and reminded her She'd dropped out of nursing school again.

"He's not answering."

"He's fine."

Den didn't respond, but quickened his pace.

Rich—she always snickered at his name—was checking out the noise they'd heard. She and Den had been on the far side of the park shining their lights into switchback

people corrals and gift shops when thunder exploded overhead. The sky had flashed like lightning and then there was the crashing *whoomp*.

Rich radioed them immediately, saying he thought whatever it was had come down near the Little Plumbers Water Extravaganza. Den responded they'd be right there and they would have if Lexa hadn't flashed her new black bra. He was a weak prude, but he was her prude—this week anyway.

Water spattered loudly in the distance, striking the spongy rubber mats covering the concrete in Little Plumbers. Every third streetlamp glowed and only at half power, casting the park in darkness with periodic dabs of brownish yellow light that couldn't quite overlap. Lexa didn't care. In fact, it was just the moody atmosphere she craved. The only time it bothered her was when strays wandered through looking for morsels missed by the cleanup. Lately, raccoons had gotten into the mix. Who knew they even had raccoons around here?

"Rich!" Den took off around the corner at a full run leaving her behind.

Seconds later she turned the same corner. Den knelt beside someone lying face up on the ground in an extended shadow between two of the lamps. The ground was littered with twisted sections of pipe, chunks of pavement, and shattered bits of plastic and wood.

Den's flashlight beam played up and down the body, pausing on the upper half, which his kneeling form blocked from her view.

She huffed up at the feet of the fallen guy. Den pointed his light up into her face and quickly averted it when she scowled. She leaned forward, hands on her knees, breathing hard. Too much junk food and not enough exercise. A pack a day wasn't helping either but quitting was for old farts, not hot twenty-somethings like her.

A stray skittered by, claws scraping on the concrete.

Den swung his light around madly trying to follow it. "What was that?"

Lexa chuckled. "Chill, spaz. Just a raccoon."

"I don't think a raccoon did this."

Lexa ran her light up the fallen man. Leather shoes, faded blue uniform just like theirs. Stupid Rich done tripped and knocked himself out cold. Moron.

His arms were bare, sleeves rolled up and cuffed. The skin was pasty in the beam of her Maglite, speckled with red welts the size of her thumb tip.

More skittering came from behind and she snapped the light down at her leg in time to see something dash away into the nearby hedge, a flurry of clicks and clacks. "Shit! Did you see that?"

"No, not clearly." He was scuffling around on the ground, but she didn't look to see what he was doing, her eyes following the flashlight beam as it inched along the hedge.

"I saw feathers, I think," said Lexa. "Think it was a… bird?"

"I *think* it took another chunk out of him."

"What?" She spun, almost tripped over Rich's feet. Den's light was steady on Rich's face. "Holy fuck."

Rich's mouth gaped, the flesh of his cheek flayed apart along the jaw exposing his teeth all the way back. Muscle was peeled aside, shredded into strips, exposing the off-white of the jawbone at his right TMJ. His ear was gone and his right eye, punctured and oozing, dangled against the side of his face. The skin around his left eye had been sliced back, but the eye remained intact. His hair, cropped close like hers, was mussed stylishly as if it hadn't heard yet the news yet and its services would no longer be needed.

She crouched. A film glistened on the facial wounds and an open gash along the front of his neck she hadn't seen before. All his exposed skin was mottled with the same lesions as his arm. She reached out to touch the wound until Den slapped her hand away.

"Don't touch him." His voice was deep against the splash of water coming from whatever leak had sprung in the

mess of pipes, tunnels and tipping buckets. A hint of chlorine tickled her nose, wafting by in the mist.

She looked slowly from Rich's face to Den's. He was intent on the hedge, panning his light back and forth.

"Den, there's no blood."

He looked at Rich and then at the painted concrete all around. A few drops and spatters, but that was all.

"There oughta be a hell of a lot of blood." She shook her head. They had to do something. "Call 911."

Den fumbled in his pocket, retrieved his phone and made the call.

Lexa bent closer to Rich's face and used a dollar-per-dozen Bic pen to poke at the film covering the neck wound—plenty deep enough to have been a gusher. The coating was sticky like sap and the skin came with it whenever she picked along the edges.

Warm, moist air brushed her neck and she jumped, swatting at her neck and looking madly around. Chittering, like the mother of all crickets, filled the air, but she saw nothing.

There was a growing chill in the September night and the airborne water spray wasn't helping. So where had the warm air come from?

She lowered her cheek within an inch of Rich's mouth and looked down the length of his body. His chest might be moving up—these were not the best conditions to observe such things.

Then the chest definitely dropped and his warm breath trickled over her skin. "Holy, shit, Den. He's breathing."

Den flipped his phone shut and knelt at Rich's side. He lowered his face next to Rich's mouth as Lexa had and after a few seconds, raised up."I don't think so."

"I know what I saw, asshole." She leaned down again and after a second felt something brush her cheek, but not a breath, more like a scratch. She jerked up.

Stretched across his open mouth on four spindly legs was a bug. A big one. It shivered making a chirping sound and sprang down from his face to the ground.

They both jumped back, Lexa landing solidly on her butt, both lights bathing the insect in whiteness. It was only a couple of inches across, Lexa tried to calm herself, but that was still a damned bug. Its exact appearance was impossible to focus on since it kept shivering, tiny claws snapping at the air.

Den's boot came down on top of it with a crunch.

A screech erupted from behind followed by clacking like machine gun fire. Lexa saw something yellowish-white flash from the darkness and smash into Den's chest, sending him sprawling to the ground. He was on his feet in an instant swinging wildly at his attacker. His flashlight, now a makeshift club, connected with the thing and sent it flying into the busted waterworks.

The creature burst from the water, staggering just beyond the reach of the splashing liquid, its body wracked with spasms.

Lexa had never seen anything like it. Her brothers had combined parts from different model kits when they were kids. They called it kitbashing. Cars, planes, animals, they didn't care. This thing was like God had taken a dinosaur—one of the fast, smart ones—and blended it with praying mantis, throwing in a fair amount of crab. It stood on four clawed legs, with two long, serrated legs folded up in front of its beaky face. Large, vertically-slitted eyes like a cat or a snake looked straight at them. The body was hard to discern, covered with feathery quills that shuddered in sync with its chattering.

It stopped moving.

"Into the water!" shouted Den and they bolted into the twisted maze, jumping over fallen pipes and dodging dangling pieces of structure.

The clacking followed them but was lost to the crashing, white noise of the falling water. They stopped

beneath a small platform that diverted most of the water from above into a wall around them. Lexa looked up into Den's grinning face and punched him in the stomach, hard. He knew she hated being wet, not as much as she hated bugs maybe and certainly not as much as their new friend.

It paced back and forth beyond the reach of the leaks, occasionally hopping to avoid random splatter. Watching it move made her want to puke. She could poke at Rich's mangled face, but something about the creature's lighting fast, hinged motions conjured up every creepy crawly nightmare she ever had. And this wasn't a nightmare.

"Are they coming?" She raked water from her face with the edges of her hands. God, she was cold.

He nodded but looked uncertain. "Some sort of major pileup. A bus plowed through an overpass guardrail and fell into the cross-traffic below. Shut down both roads. Lots of casua—"

"So they aren't coming?" Her heart pounded harder and she gasped for air. The bug continued to pace, stopping every few seconds to step into the spray before leaping back out and shaking its quilled body. She forced herself to breathe slow and deep.

"Waynesville's sending a cop. They're trying to find someone that can break away. I didn't know Rich was still alive then, so I don't think they considered us a priority."

"Call them back." When Den didn't move, Lexa snatched the phone from his hand and flipped it open. No lights, no sound. She pressed the ON button. Nothing. Water poured from its hinged joint. "Oh, that's just fucking great. Send a man to the goddamned moon but we can't build a fucking waterproof cell."

"Actually," said Den, pointing deeper into the maze of pipes and crawling tubes. "You may be onto something."

She turned. A stainless cylinder, three feet long, charred stripes radiating from the blunt end, lay in a large hole a few yards away. The matting smoldered, melted and running down into the three foot pit the object rested in.

Den glanced at the bug and left her beneath the platform, running the few steps around the crater to the far side. He aimed his flashlight at the object and then up into the pipe work pyramid above. Lexa joined him and looked up through the hole punched downward from the sky.

"Is it…"

"No," said Den. His light bracketed a painted symbol under one of the burned stripes. Three circles over another. "I think that might be the biohazard logo."

She looked at him a second. He *was* pretty smart.

"But this," he said, "is definitely you know who." The circle of fading light moved to a crest of stripes and stars. Some variation on the American flag or the UK. "Maybe it's some bio-weapon."

"Yeah, that's it, Einstein. Let's bio-bomb Water World." She tried to force a laugh, but her head was throbbing, making the attempt painful.

"I don't know." He tapped his failing light and the beam grew brighter again. "Maybe it's a failed experiment—something too dangerous to store here—maybe the meteor shower knocked it out of orbit. Heck, I don't know."

She looked at the water's edge but didn't see the bug at first. Now, it stood inside the falling water, no longer shuddering, tapping one clawed leg on the first section of the dimpled, nonslip matting.

Oh, shit. She began to shake, tears forming in her eyes. Den placed his arm around her shoulders and she didn't bother to resist. "Den, when they get here how are they gonna get in?"

She felt him nod slowly and release his hold. "I told them I'd meet them at the main gate."

"And leave me -"

"I'll run as hard as I can." He nodded faster now, the plan coming together in his head.

"It'll chase me. You run to the office and lock yourself in until I get there with help."

"N-no." Tears poured from her eyes, washed away by water falling all around them.

"I've got to." He moved the light around until he found the bug. It hopped to one side trying to elude the beam. "Time's running out. Junior's putting things together, getting braver."

She couldn't believe he was suggesting they split up. Worse, she couldn't believe she was acting like a weepy little bitch.

"Lexa, I love you." And he was gone. Her heart sputtered and she screamed.

It was on him before he'd gotten three steps out of the water, leaping straight onto his back and driving both front claws into his neck. He fell with a thump, face down.

She was frozen, water raining down over her face. The bug danced around Den's body tugging at him from behind and then pushing at his chest, trying to roll him onto his back. Each time, Den flopped back onto his stomach.

It skittered to his head, serrated legs rubbing against one another. Light glinted off bone white claws as they flashed up and then down.

She heard screaming. The bug and Den and Rich were all rushing at her. The bug was in the air, legs and claws spread, feathery quills fanned out like some arcane dandelion seed head caught in the wind. A section of pipe flashed out connecting with the creature with a crunch that she felt in her arms, shoulders and chest. The creature smashed to the ground, legs jerking, trying to right itself even as the pipe came down again and again.

As the creature's movements slowed and then ceased, the screaming continued and she decided it must be her own and stopped.

In the silence of the splashing water and her roaring heartbeat, she saw the length of pipe in her hand and let it drop. The bug was still, a broken mess of slime and bony shell. Satan's goddamned crab cake. A gelatinous ball lay

intact a foot from its quills, a sinewy streamer attaching it to the bug. Inside the ball a small spidery form twitched.

She scraped it from her boot a half second later and looked around for more, but found none. Sitting beside Den, she rolled him over, easing his head into her lap. The wounds on his neck weren't bad and his cheek was torn just a little. No blood to mention and, besides, facial scars were hot. His body flinched and he managed to angle his head to look at her, his eyelids fluttering, not yet able to blink fully.

She brushed a wayward strand of hair from his face. "Fucking moron."

The corner of his mouth turned up and he half-closed his eyes.

'The Worms'

Deborah Walker and Rebecca Papanicolaou



Bryce woke to the sound of screams.

No. Not again. Every night it was the same.

He forced his body from the luxury of his warm bed and went to his daughter's room. The harsh screams were reverberating throughout the dome. He quickly opened the door and saw a small figure sitting upright in the bed. Rose's face was illuminated by the night light; her wild eyes were glistening with tears. Bryce switched on the main light, while making comforting 'Shh. Shh.' noises.

"Daddy's here. It's alright, darling. Daddy's here."

The screams stopped and were replaced with a blend of sobs and words. When the story came it was barely coherent, "It was the worms, Daddy. They came again. They were green with black spots. They were eating my skin."

"My poor darling," said Bryce. He was so tired he could barely listen. He wrapped his daughter in a comforting hug.

"Where's Mummy?" said Rose, clinging to her father.

Where was Verna? Where was his daughter's mother? She should be here. She should be helping. But, no. Her *job* was too important.

"Mummy will be back soon. Tell Daddy about your dream." He kissed his daughter's hair.

"The worms were eating my skin again. I hate them. I think they want to kill me."

Bryce shuddered. The poor little thing. The dreams were getting worse.

"That is a horrible, horrible dream, my little darling." He held the small body closer to him, inhaling her sleep-scented smell. "But it was just a dream. Do you want to come into Daddy's bed?"

His daughter nodded.

"The worms don't come into your bed, do they, Daddy?"

Bryce picked up his daughter. When did she get so heavy? He carried her back into his own bed.

"There are no such things as monsters, honey. It was just a dream."

He gently placed Rose into his bed and then crashed into sleep beside her.

* * *

The next morning at breakfast, Bryce was so tired, so very, very tired. These constant interruptions to his sleep were steadily draining away his strength.

Rose, however, chatted away happily to her brother, telling him the lurid details of her dream.

"It was at school, Sam. I saw some interesting worms on a bush. When I went to look at them someone gave me a push. Maybe it was Anita," she said thoughtfully.

"Cool," said Sam. "Hey, look outside."

Oh, no, thought Bryce. He had forgotten to opaque the windows.

Outside in the grey desert, there was trouble. Bryce could see a group of natives surrounding a soldier. The gleaming bodies of the natives glistened in the rising light of the small, fierce sun.

No wonder Rose was having nightmares.

Bryce quickly pressed the window switch and the curved dome windows began to opaque. But it didn't close the view quickly enough. Rose and Sam drank in the sight: a group of natives raising their bodies, seemingly endless, segment by segment they rose from the soil. Their flexible bodies were covered in iridescent leather. Their faces were crowned with intelligence. That was the worst thing, worm body and near-human face. Their needle toothed mouths were open in fury, and their bodies weaved, making sinuous attacks against the lone soldier. Their eyes shields were open and Bryce looked away from their alien, red marble eyes.

The mechanism for the window must be broken. Rose and Sam watched the soldier firing wildly as the natives overwhelmed him. With their young eyes they watched the violence in the desolate landscape that was now their home. At least the dome was sound-proofed they couldn't hear the clicking noise of the natives, nor the cries of the soldier.

It took a few more moments before Bryce could break the spell of violence that had transfixed both parent and children. Bryce pulled the children away.

He felt confused by what he had seen. It was too much for him to comprehend. He felt sickened that his children, *his children,* had witnessed this spectacle.

"Who was the soldier?" asked Sam. "It wasn't Mummy, was it?"

"No," said Bryce, but he couldn't be sure. He had only caught a glimpse of the soldier, a red and black uniform and a face obscured by the helmet of the corps.

How could he forgotten to close the windows? He was just so tired. This place was so strange: too many things to remember, too many things to get used to.

"No, it wasn't Mummy," he said. The window was opaque now and showing tranquil scenes from the earth they had left far behind. "Who wants pancakes?"

"Me!"

"Me!"

"What's going on?" Verna walked into the room. She looked rested. She wore her uniform with a casual élan. *She actually looks younger,* thought Bryce. *This life suits her. She's thriving in this strange environment.*

A long scar gleamed on her face, the souvenir of a recent battle and its reward was a silver thread of metal stitched onto her uniform.

"Mummy!" said the children, scrambling off their seats. "When did you get back?"

Yes, when did you get back?

"Late last night. I came in to give you a kiss, but you were fast asleep – snoring."

"I do not snore," said Rose.

"I don't either," said Sam.

"Yes, you do. Both of you were snoring like two little piglets. Snort. Snort."

"I don't snore, Mummy." Rose's eyes began to fill with tears.

"Snort. Snort."

"I don't. I don't. You're a liar."

"That's enough," said Bryce, glaring at his wife -- she always went too far.

He bent down to Rose, "No, of course you don't snore."

"She's a baby, isn't she, Mummy?" said Sam, keen to collude.

"No, she's a little piglet. Snort. Snort."

"Will you stop it!" shouted Bryce. "It's bad enough that we're here without you making things more difficult with the children." His voice seemed to echo of the dome. Verna looked at him with amazement. Bryce saw that the children looked frightened.

"Verna, can I have a word with you -- in private?"

"Mummy's in trouble again, and she's only just come home."

The children laughed.

"Now, Verna . . ."

"Okay, okay. Be good, kids, while Mummy and Daddy talk."

"Yes, Mummy."

Bryce and Verna walked into the living area which adjoined the kitchen.

"What's wrong?" asked Verna.

"There was fighting outside the dome today. The children saw it. What's going on Verna? You promised me that it was safe here."

"It's the natives; they've reneged on the treaty."

"But I thought it was all arranged. You told me it was safe."

"Things have changed, Bryce." Verna looked at him. "When we got here we found that our projections were unsatisfactory. We simply need more land to make the mining operations cost-effective."

"And that's why the natives are fighting? Because you've taken more land?"

"Exactly."

"But you can't take more land. It was all agreed."

The dome's windows continued to show a series of pictures of earth, fantasy pastoral scenes of wide-open spaces that belonged to the long dead past.

"We need the land, Bryce. If we're not going to live like peasants here, scrabbling for a half- existence. The natives will just have to understand that."

"Incredible. You're absolutely incredible."

"What's wrong now?" Verna's face was stained a dark red, her voice was quiet and precise.

"You knew that it'd be hard out here. We're pioneers. And you were the first one to complain on earth. 'Ooh, I

can't get a job. There's no work. There's no space.' Well there's work here, and there's land for the taking."

What was the point of talking? They would never come together. Who was this woman? Bryce looked at his wife. Who was this woman?

She had changed so much, and now she just overwhelmed him. He was so very, very tired. He couldn't think.

"I know it's hard for you too, Verna" Was it hard for her? She seemed to revel in this life. "Let's have a nice family breakfast together"

They walked back into the kitchen area. Bryce started to prepare the pancake mixture. He reached for the floor and eggs. He could hear his wife whispering to the children. He cleared the kitchen window and looked outside. An army vehicle was clustered around the fallen soldier.

In the distance he could see the sand moving as the natives, the worms, moved away under the desert, moving gracefully through the land of their ancestors.

The worms.

Bryce could hear his wife whispering to the children, ""Mummy is in some serious trouble, oh yes. She's been out for weeks fighting the monsters, outside. I'm making things safe for you children and Daddy."

"Monsters, Mummy?" said Rose.

"Yeh! The horrible monsters who live here and who don't want to share. I'm a soldier I make things safe for all of you."

Bryce looked over to his daughter, she was beginning to tremble. He looked over to his son, he was running around the dome, firing an imaginary ray-gun.

"Zzzzz- zap, Zzzzz-zap"

And Verna, heroic Verna, standing there in the chaos of her choosing, oblivious to all, with a smile on her face.

Bryce took out four glasses for the orange juice. "There are no monsters. The natives are people, a different

type of people." His hand clenched so tightly around a glass that he thought it might break. "There are no monsters." He looked outside at the retreating shapes of the natives and then he looked at his wife. "There are no monsters."

'The Beast of Hindu Kush'

Steve Lowe



Droplets of exhalation soak through the hood near Mac's nose and mouth. It slaps against his skin as they run on and on through the subterranean labyrinth. His liquid breath cools his face and the chilled cave air envelopes him like the deep water of a lake. He makes mental note of his surroundings.

Rocky terrain, in a cave, lots of turns and double backs. They're trying to confuse me, make it impossible to find my way out if I escape.

He doesn't expect that to happen. Mac is unsure which specific group abducted him, but he suspects one of the fractured offshoots of Ansar Al-Islam or al-Zarqawi's bastardized Mujahedeen remnants. Regardless of their identity, Mac knows their singular purpose. He's not a hostage, he's an example.

He focuses on their chatter. He catches bits and pieces of Arabic he knows and figures they're in an area of the eastern Hindu Kush mountain range that separates Afghanistan and Pakistan, and this, a newly discovered sanctuary therein. The military pressure that ratcheted up three months ago seems to be affecting them. They're constantly on the move among the mountains, seeking out or cutting in new respites. During brief moments of silence, the

distant whump of American ordinance on the surface vibrates through the ancient rock surrounding them. Several times, the group of roughly half a dozen stops and argues. They shove Mac along with their rifle butts and yank him back by his hair.

They don't know where they're going.

A man with a weasly, high-pitched voice bickers with another man as they rush down one corridor, then double back and make for another. Despite eight months of training in Arabic, Mac can only make out a few random words. They speak too fast and in a different dialect than his Egyptian instructor.

He's near collapse after the hours of driving and running and being dragged and kicked and cursed. He gives up listening to his captors and focuses on blocking out the sharp pain entrenched between his shoulders after hours with his hands bound tightly behind his back. He was hog-tied and thrown in the back of a van, where they beat him with sticks and fists and boots. He was starved and deprived of sleep. His concept of time is gone.

How long since they grabbed me in broad daylight from the marketplace in Islamabad? One day? Two?

They stop again and Mac is thrown to the rocky floor. His cheek slams against jagged stone. Skin tears and blood flows. More arguing between Weasel and his disagreeable counterpart. Sounds of a scuffle and other, timid voices join in, but none seem to want any part of this apparent power struggle. Weasel's opponent speaks low and slow with simmering anger in his voice. There is the unmistakable metallic snap of a chambered round in a handgun. A final shout, cut off by a single shot, which reverberates against the cave walls like a grenade blast. Mac's head buzzes from the concussion. They yank him back to his feet and they're off again through the labyrinth.

They're afraid. They're falling apart.

A blow to the back of Mac's legs drops him to his knees. Weasel speaks and the others scurry about. He

conducts the show with vigor now that his lone voice of opposition has apparently been silenced. The hood is ripped from Mac's head and glimpses a small, rocky chamber before a blindfold blots out the world again.

Weasel's voice is close now, his hot breath near Mac's face. He spews a steady stream of indiscernible Arabic. There are clicks, followed by heat. The edges of his blindfold glow faintly. There's a crackling sound, and wads of crumpled paper pelt Mac's chest and face. He picks out the word Geneva and another wad bounces off his chin.

They've got spotlights on me. They're gonna film this.

He's seen the videos leaked onto the Internet, four in the last month alone, each with the same message and conclusion. Weasel pontificates much clearer now, his voice turned away from Mac.

He's talking to the camera. Reading from a script.

From behind, Mac hears the drawn out metallic swish of an unsheathed blade. He imagines a gleaming Arabian saif sliding out of its scabbard. Weasel shouts, "Saifullah!" In unison, the other men respond, "SAIF AL-HAQ!"

Sword of Allah. Sword of Truth.

Mac flinches at a cold, sharp edge pressing against the back of his neck. The blade slides across his skin in three long strokes, just under the base of his skull. Warmth seeps down his neck and locks of his own hair land in his upturned palms, still bound painfully behind his back. He feels the blade a second time, pressing, slicing, measuring. The men repeat their chant, "Saifullah! Saif al-Haq!"

He's lining up his strike. Hoping for a nice, clean chop for the camera.

Mac knows it doesn't work that way. There will be cutting and hacking and the god-awful mess inherent with separating a head from a torso with such an instrument. Thick muscle and dense bone are difficult to work through, even with the sharpest of blades. Rivulets of sweat slide down his face and drip from his quivering nose and chin.

Weasel's voice reaches a crescendo of venomous ranting. Mac is sized up and the moment has come, the end of his life here, in this underground tomb, broadcast to the world. His muscles quake with the fear of blind anticipation. Emotion spills forth as he waits for the first hack. He prays that his executioner possesses the same vitriol and resolve as the pontificating coward presiding over his death. That the blade stroke will be quick and confident, with resolve and purpose. Silence cloaks the cave.

The blow never comes. From behind, a sickening snap, a ripping sound, a choked gurgle. A wave of warm, thick fluid splashes across Mac's back and neck. It slops over his shoulders and splatters his face, soaks through his clothes and seeps down into his pants. Chaos erupts inside the close cave walls.

Weapons discharge and men scream in fear and pain. Bullets crash into the rock walls and ricochet wildly, showering Mac with bits of stinging stone. Hot shell casings bounce off his head and arms, the cannonade of automatic weapons fire a deafening thunder.

Men rush past and knock him flat. Hard boots grind his flesh as his captors scramble over him. An intense, crushing weight presses him into the granite floor and he feels the prick of coarse hair and scrape of sharp nails, like claws piercing his skin. Then it's over and the room is still, save for his booming heart and the high-pitched whine searing his brain.

He lays propped on his side, breathing hard. Warm, salty blood fills his mouth. The blindfold has edged up his forehead, allowing in a crack of light. He tilts his head back and scans the room through his sliver of vision. He sees the portable lighting they set up for their video shoot, one still standing and illuminating the cave, the other dark and smashed on the ground. The video camera still standing next to the spotlight, a small, red glow on the viewfinder.

Mac struggles to his knees and searches the ground until his bound hands pass over the cool metal of the saif. He

sits on his feet and positions the blade between his boots. He slides his hands around each side of the blade and saws his bonds, careful not to go too fast and slice open his wrist. The rope slips easily across the edge and Mac feels a momentary pang of gratitude mixed with rage that his captors had enough forethought to procure a sharp blade for his execution.

He stands and rips the blindfold from his eyes. He wipes thick blood from his face and hair. It drips from his fingertips and runs beneath his clothes, down into his socks. After a moment of adjustment to the sharp light inside the otherwise dark cave, Mac sees his surroundings. Three mangled bodies lay on the hard floor, shredded and oozing blood in eddies. Just beyond the intense glow of the spotlight, his would-be executioner lies near the back of the small chamber, halved at the midsection. Flesh dangles from the separated body and drapes over rocks in ragged chunks.

Torn in half? What the fuck?

Ghostly rumors of gunshots echo through the tunnel leading into the chamber, barely audible above the lingering ring in Mac's head. He steps around the other bodies, mauled in a similarly brutal manner, and checks the dropped weapons for ammunition. He grabs an AK-47, a newer Chinese model. The magazine contains black-tipped armor piercing rounds, the very ammunition for which his company was developing new armor for the U.S. military. Shear thickening fluid, or liquid armor as he liked to call it. Light and loose until a sharp impact stiffens it instantly. He arrived in Pakistan less than a week ago to join up with an Army Ranger company assigned to field test the new equipment during raids into these same mountain passes.

The ringing in Mac's head slowly subsides and he hears more AK fire rattling through the maze of tunnels, further away now. His abductors are on the run and Mac wonders if it could be his Ranger unit flushing the terrorists out. He looks at the bodies again.

Rangers didn't do this.

He walks over to the video camera, which is still recording. The flip-out screen shows the floor before him and the ruined body just beyond. He backs the video up and hits play. He watches himself, on his knees, hands bound, blindfold over his eyes, a trickle of blood on his cheek. An Arab stands behind him, holding a long, curved sword to his neck. The executioner pulls the saif back, then slowly sets it in place again, lining up his strike. He lifts the blade high above his head. His body convulses. The sound of ripping flesh and snapping bone. A shower of blood bursts forth and the executioner disappears into the shadows behind Mac. Then, utter confusion. Firing, screaming, men falling over themselves and running past the camera. Through the haze from the discharging weapons, Mac catches a brief glimpse of something else. A dark, hulking mass rushes through the shadows, momentarily illuminated in peaks of blurry brown by the muzzle flashes. He backs the film up several times and watches the scene over and over, but there is too much chaos to make it out.

Big sumbitch, whatever the hell it is.

Mac leaves the chamber and heads down the corridor, listening for the distant gunshots to guide him. Every fifty feet, glow sticks on the ground light the way, casting a spectral light that is quickly swallowed up by the crushing dark of the passage. He runs through the corridor until he comes to a fork, split in two directions, each faintly lit. He stops and listens through a solid minute of silence.

On the ground before him, splashes of dark color the floor and walls of the corridor. Mac picks up a glow stick and holds it before him. Dark blood everywhere, like thick crude in the faint yellow glow. Up the right passageway, close echoes of more gunfire and a lone, terrified scream. Then, silence once more. Up the left passageway, a blood trail.

Mac jogs down the left passage, advancing steadily. Coursing adrenaline masks his exhaustion and momentarily soothes his bruised body. Intermittent swaths of blood along the walls become more frequent, until it becomes one long

streak. He slows and hugs the wall as the corridor rounds a corner. In the stifling silence, a hacking cough and the wet slap of fluid spat upon rock.

Mac edges around the bend, the AK-47 pressed firmly into his shoulder, his twitching finger on the trigger. A bearded Arab, eyes closed and limbs awash in blood, sits with his back against the hard wall. Mac kicks the man's boot and shines the dim light on him. He flinches and covers his face with his right arm.

"Stand," Mac says in Arabic.

The man opens his eyes and takes a moment to register the figure before him. "The American," he whispers, shaking his head.

"You speak English?" The man does not answer and Mac kicks his foot again, harder. "You speak English!"

"Yes."

Mac recognizes the voice belonging to the conductor of his failed execution. "What's your name?"

"Hamid."

"Stand up, Hamid."

"I cannot."

"You better or you're gonna to feel a hell of a lot worse than you do right now."

Hamid holds out his right hand. After a moment of consideration, Mac grabs it and hauls the man to his feet. Hamid slouches against the wall, his left arm dangling loosely at his side. Blood flows from his fingertips and splashes on the rocks below.

"What the hell happened back there?"

Hamid does not answer. A pained grin stretches across his craggy face. Mac jabs the rifle barrel into Hamid's ruined arm, eliciting a shrill cry from the dying man.

"Fuck you! What the hell happened back there? What was that thing?"

Hamid coughs and spits more blood. He wipes his mouth with the back of his functioning hand and wobbles

forward, pressing his chest into the end of the AK-47. "It is Barmanou. It is what you think it is."

"What is Barmanou?"

"A demon from the pit of Hell. Both man and beast, banished beneath the Hindu Kush long ago by Allah Himself, never to walk the Earth or terrorize His people again. But it has returned, awakened by your bombs."

"Our bombs?" Mac presses Hamid into the rock wall with the gun barrel. The incision in his neck tingles and burns from the sweat pouring into it. "What about you assholes running around down here, huh? Hiding in places humans don't belong instead of coming out and fighting like men. You ever think about that, you piece of shit? No, you're too busy making the world a better place one head at a time I guess."

Hamid's maroon teeth leak blood between the gaps. It spills over his smiling lips. "It will find its way out of this mountain and become a plague upon the land, the first of many brought on by your wickedness."

Mac drives a forearm under the man's chin. A dozen replies shoot through his mind, but he grits his teeth against them.

Not now. I don't have time for this shit.

"You think what you want, but I'm gettin' out of here. Where's the exit?"

Hamid's chest rattles with laughter. "Do you really think I would tell you?"

Hatred flares in Hamid's eyes, even on the verge of death. Mac steps back and raises the gun to his shoulder. "No, I suppose you wouldn't." He fires a single round through Hamid's forehead.

Echoes from the report resonate away through the labyrinth. Mac rifles Hamid's clothing, producing a magazine of ammunition and a GPS locater. He thumbs the gadget's controls and calibrates his bearings.

He trots along the corridor, each footfall accompanied by an increasing level of pain. Muscles burn

and he feels the imprint of every boot heel and closed fist and rifle butt laid upon his skin. Over the sound of his own panting, he hears another noise shuffling up from behind. He stops and listens to pounding footsteps approaching fast.

Jesus it's coming.

He breaks into a sprint. The ineffective glowsticks cast little light on the uneven terrain ahead. Invisible outcroppings of rock trip him and send him sprawling to the jagged floor. With each painful spill, the noise of his pursuer intensifies, accompanied by a thick huffing and a low, guttural growl with each exhalation.

He pictures an immense creature, nearly twice the size of a man, covered in stiff, wiry hair and the hardening blood of its victims. It hammers toward him on powerful limbs, moving twice as fast as he in the infernal darkness.

Mac surges on, dizzy from the insufficient oxygen in the dank tunnel, but a distant shimmer of natural light brightens his way and buoys his spirit. He wills his body toward the growing glow. The growling, whining beast sounds no more than a few yards behind, its oppressive presence nearing with each heavy footfall. Mac's muscles revolt, his breath ragged and shallow. He feels a breeze of warm, fresh air.

The earth shakes above his head and beneath his feet in a succession of small earthquakes. Stone and dust and chunks of rock rain down on him just as the mouth of the cave comes into view, marked by a brilliant shaft of daylight that stabs his eyes.

He's a few long strides from freedom, but the exit vanishes in a ball of orange fire and hail of rock and earth that blasts him back down the passage. Mac wallows on the ground, trying to clear to his rattled mind. The light of day is gone, replaced again by utter black. The tremors from the impacting bombs slowly fade into the distance as the B-1's probing sorties move away across the mountains. The tumble and crash of rocks from the cave's roof and walls slowly

diminishes until there is silence again within the close stillness.

Mac lies prone, listening but hearing no sound, save for his strained breathing and the thumping ache that has seized control of his body. He rolls onto his hands and knees and searches through the blackness for the AK-47. Panic supplicates adrenaline in the suffocating dark.

Gotta find a new way out. Gotta be another opening somewhere.

Rather than the comforting steel of his weapon, his hands brush across coarse hair and massive claws. In the vacuum of the sealed-off cave, Mac suddenly feels surrounded by a massive, rumbling presence. It sucks the remaining oxygen from the air, replacing it with waves of beastly stench. Mac falls back on his knees. A pair of ochre eyes burn through the black.

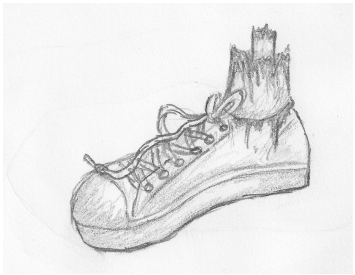
A wet, dense mass plops on the ground before him. He reaches blindly and feels a mangled orb. Ears, nose, long, wiry hair covering a chin. His fingers trace the circular bullet hole in Hamid's forehead, still oozing blood and bits of brain and skull.

"Oh, God."

A plume of hot, rotten breath washes across Mac's face. His arms drop to his sides. His right hand lights upon cool gunmetal.

'Derelict'

William Wilde



I was in the wrong part of town.

As soon as I crossed over the river from the city center and I was a handful of blocks north of the I-5 Freeway exit, I felt it.

At first, it was just the usual commercial strip of car dealers and fast food places. But after I passed the Fremont Street intersection, something was different. It was if I had just crossed over an invisible barrier, one that I didn't even know was there.

I started to see things on the street that I wasn't used to seeing: steel bar grates on the retail store fronts, paper trash blown into blocked doorways, other places vacant and boarded up. On the plywood sheets over the windows, elaborate and obscene graffiti and gang sign markings were spray painted.

Few pedestrians were on the sidewalks although the rain had stopped earlier that afternoon. The scattered people that I did see had faces turned away and a stiff, hurried wariness in the way they moved that bothered me. Even though I was in traffic in broad daylight with other cars, I felt conspicuous in the BMW sedan I was driving.

At the red light signal at Shaver Street, I hit the all-lock button on the car doors. After I did it, it seemed

cowardly, but I still left the car doors locked. As soon as the light changed, I accelerated. It felt safer to be moving.

I never came to that district of my own accord. But Ray Percy, one of my best clients, still owned a piece of property in the area. An old derelict warehouse that had sat in disuse for years. Ray was still paying property taxes on the place. He wanted to get rid of it and he asked me to look at it and see what could be done.

I didn't want the sales listing. It would be nothing but a headache, but I did too much business with Ray to turn it down. He kept bugging me for an answer.

At the intersection with Portland Street, I turned left. A few blocks later, I approached the ragged greenness of Peninsula Park. TV news stories came back to me. Crack sales in the park. Gang turf. Drive-by shootings. I sped up again.

On the seat next to me, my city map was folded open. I had jotted down the property address on one of my "Bob Burke Realty Broker" notepads.

I came to the street I wanted and turned onto it.

The houses on the street were mostly ramshackle cottages, wooden porches worn and peeling, scruffy yards uncared for. I couldn't tell if anybody lived in the places or not, but a handful of beat-up cars were parked at the curbs or in the front yards.

I drove slower, squinting through my glasses lenses at the faded house numbers. I was getting close to the address. In the next block, I found it. Alone in the empty expanse of a trashy lot, the warehouse still stood, just where my scribbled note said it should be.

It was an ugly brute.

The siding of the squat, wood frame structure must have been painted egg yolk yellow at one time. Most of the color had peeled away by now, showing jagged patches of gray board beneath. The faint red letters of part of a sign on the building were still readable: "rage," probably the remnant of "Storage."

One end of the building was caved in upon itself. Water damage must have rotted the roof deck, then the support beams. Split fingers of wood poked out of the pile of rubble and roof tar.

The cement skin of what had once been a driveway was cracked and broken. Bright green weeds pushed up like sores through the pavement cracks.

I pulled over to the curb and parked. Without even getting out of the car, I could see the building was worthless. Even if it was intact, it would be useless. The low ceiling height and wood frame construction made the warehouse obsolete. It would never meet fire code regulations. The lot itself might have some base salvage value. Someone might want to do something with it. I couldn't think why.

It was junk property in a slum district and that's all it would ever be.

I'd seen enough. But it wouldn't be enough for Ray. He'd want a full appraisal report. I had my camera with me. The street around me looked deserted. I thought it was safe to get out of the car, just for a moment.

Outside the car, the wind was damp and gritty in my face. Early spring in Portland. I zipped up my suede jacket. I took a few outside shots of the building from different angles to show the damage. That was all I needed. I hesitated. The door of the office entrance was gone from its hinges.

The opening was a gaping black hole.

Alright. Just one close-up of the interior to prove I had at least looked inside.

I walked up the broken driveway. At the doorway, I stopped at the threshold. The interior was dimly visible for only a few feet inside the door. I squinted into the half-light of the office at scraps of wood scattered on the floor amid heaps of rotting cardboard boxes. The musty odor of decay filled my nostrils.

I raised the camera and took a snapshot. The white flash lighted the interior for an instant to show more debris and the corner of an old wooden desk.

If I moved inside just twenty feet, I could probably get a shot of the whole core storage area itself. Ray would want to see that part of it, damn him. One more shot, then I was through.

I stepped inside the building.

Immediately, I was plunged into grainy darkness. My eyes strained in front of me. My leg bumped into something. I drew back. The junker desk. I moved around it.

I continued forward into the open central storage room, stepping gingerly. I kept stumbling over rubble on the concrete floor. My outstretched hand touched a support post just before I would have smacked into it.

I had gone deeper into the interior than I intended. With each step, I told myself that the doorway back to the outside was still within sight behind me.

I stopped where I was. It was far enough.

I fumbled at the camera and clicked the button. No flash. It wasn't charging. I started to back up toward the doorway to check the batteries.

Above me, the building suddenly sighed and shifted. I sensed a movement in the air overhead of something coming down. A hard, heavy object struck my left shoulder and knocked me sideways. I heard a dull thud on the floor next to me. It sounded like wood falling.

I tried to regain my balance. My right foot rolled on a chunk of concrete on the floor. The camera flew out of my hand as I went down.

I was on my knees. My hand went into a pile of debris. My scraped fingers felt damp, rough wood, gritty leather, laces, a shoe --- something inside it. Something soft and pulpy, a bony spur.

I screamed out loud and jerked my hand away. I scrambled backward on my knees.

The debris pile shuddered, as though something in the middle of it had moved. A cascade of wood pieces was pushed aside. I heard harsh, rustling noises on the concrete, but I couldn't tell where the sound was coming from.

For the first time, I felt a prickly sense of fear that there was something else inside the warehouse with me. I thought I heard the furtive probing of a sluggish body beginning to stir in the darkness.

The earlier wood fall had opened a new thin seam in the roof above. In the faint gray light, I could barely make out the debris mound in front of me and the form of something curled amidst the pile. At first, I thought it was a length of left-over plastic construction pipe. It was milky white and reptilian in shape, with the thick diameter of sewer line. In the dim light stream, I could swear that the whole pipe length seemed to tremble faintly. Suddenly, the milky white skin rippled powerfully and curled toward me.

I lurched back to my feet and ran in blind panic. I stumbled stupidly in the darkness. I was disoriented, unable to see the path back to the doorway. Which way had I come in, damn it! I blundered around in useless circles.

Around me, the building began to move like a sleeping thing coming awake.

In the blackness, the unseen walls creaked in agony. The roof above made a sound like fabric ripping. A new weight crashed down close to me. A shower of fragments followed it. The whole rotting shell of the place was coming down on top of me.

One thought shrieked madly in my brain over and over. Get out! Get out! I reeled forward and crashed full into a support pillar. The impact knocked me backward.

Behind me, I heard something slither heavily across the concrete after me. A damp, sour odor thickened in the air. My leg bumped into a muscular coil as massive as a tree log and I nearly fell over it. My hands pressed against cold, slimy skin coated with grit. The skin contracted at my touch.

I screamed again in fresh terror and flailed backward.

I was sure now that something else was in there, hunting me in the darkness. That split-second image of a segmented, snake-like form flashed through my mind again. I

heard the sounds of a sinewy body scraping closer, trying to encircle me within its sliding coils.

I turned frantically in another direction. My breath came in rasping gulps. I heard myself making shrill, bleating sounds like an animal as I fled. I fell over the twisted frame of something that entangled my legs. A wheel barrow. I clawed over its sharp edges, kept going.

Then I saw it. The yellow rectangle of the doorway outlined faintly in the distance. I strained toward it, grunting and spitting saliva.

I tripped over freshly fallen wood scraps on the floor. The great weight of a support beam thundered down in the darkness. A fleshy mass struck swiftly at my heels, nearly bringing me down. Something like a comb of teeth raked at the fabric of my pants legs.

I got closer to the doorway and saw more light outside. It gave me new, wild strength. I made a frenzied rush forward into the office area. My foot rolled on a last rock. The impetus threw me backward out of the entrance door. My shoulder smashed against the doorjamb. I fell onto my back in the driveway.

I lay still to get my breath. It hurt to take in air. My heart was pounding thickly and I felt sick to my stomach. I gibbered softly to myself that it was alright now. I was outside in the daylight. Out of that place.

It took several moments before I realized that the warehouse had become perfectly silent again.

A foot scraped on the pavement close to me. I turned my head to the sound.

A small Hispanic boy in a ragged red Trailblazers sweatshirt stared at me from a few feet away. His arms were loaded with scraps of wood. Behind him, a little girl in a cotton print dress, his sister probably, peered over his shoulder.

I rolled over and got stiffly to my feet. "Don't come near here," I warned them. "There's something awful inside that building."

The boy blinked.

"Don't you kids understand me? This place is dangerous. You can't play here. That building almost killed me."

The boy nodded. "We heard you yelling stuff. We seen you run out of there and fall down."

I remembered my hysterical screams inside the warehouse. I knew how I must look to those kids. My designer suede jacket was streaked with grime. I had speckles of grit on my glasses lenses. Probably more dirt in my hair.

I worked to control my shaky voice. I tried to talk to the boy on his own level.

"Listen to me, son. There's a monster in that place. It could hurt you bad."

The boy shrugged. "Sure."

I saw that he still didn't understand me. "Look, I'm trying to protect you. That old building is a bad place. Don't ever go near it. Something *mean* is in there."

"We know."

"You know about it?"

"Uh-huh. We throws rocks in there at it sometimes. Big ugly thing don't ever catch us."

Inside the warehouse doorway, something large shifted in sudden, grating movement. I flinched backward from the building in renewed fear.

The boy stood where he was. "It's okay, big sucker don't like to come out in the day 'cause the light hurts it. Only comes out in the nighttime to hunt for stuff."

I gaped at him. When I stepped forward to try to make him listen, both children shrank away from me. What was wrong with these kids? They should have been afraid of that rotting warehouse and whatever monstrous thing was inside it, but they seemed to be more wary of me, as if I was a threat to them somehow. There was no way for me to get through to them.

I looked at the wood in the boy's arms. "Did you get that from the warehouse?"

He wouldn't answer.

"It's okay if you took it. I don't care about the wood. It's just junk. But don't go in there anymore to get it. You could get hurt. What do you want all that wood for anyway?"

He blinked. "To get my house warm. My mama wants this wood."

I looked at the girl standing shyly behind him. Her cotton dress seemed too thin for her to be out in the cold air without a coat.

A woman's voice called in Spanish from a porch down the street.

The boy said, "We got to go. C'mon, Rosa."

They turned to leave. I watched their small backs run quickly away, never looking back.

When the children were gone, I was suddenly afraid again without them there.

My hands hurt where the knuckles were scraped and raw. A dull pain throbbed in my lower back. I suddenly wanted to be back in the warm comfort of my office, amid the familiar safety of my mounted sales award plaque and pictures of my new boat.

I looked back at the low hulk of the warehouse, with its broken spine and the one baleful eyeball of the doorway, crouched in the growing dusk of late afternoon. A rotting, forgotten derelict in a blighted, forgotten corner of the city.

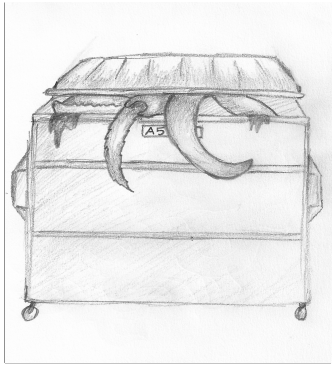
I shuddered inside my jacket. I remembered my camera left lying on the floor somewhere in the rubble. I could never go back for it now. Let it lie there.

I turned away and hurried to the car, locking the doors again when I got inside. My hand shook so badly that I had trouble putting the key into the ignition. I got the engine started finally and put on the headlights.

The daylight was going fast. I didn't want to get caught alone on the street in that place after dark.

'Oscar'

Doug Murano



"If you think we haven't been watching you standing over there in the shadows, you're a lot less clever than you look, young man," said the bum leaning on the Dumpster at the end of the dead-end alleyway. He held a skewer of meat over a burning barrel full of trash.

"Sorry--yeah, you caught me. Don't shoot," said Bernard, stepping out into the orange flicker of the fire, holding his hands up in exaggerated innocence as he ventured into the middle of the abandoned industrial district's old service road. Bernard hadn't expected to find anybody else there--had been sure he was alone for at least a mile on all sides until he caught wind of the cooking meat and followed his nose to the old man and his barrel.

"Come on…come on over here and warm up. No sense in any of us being cold in the middle of the night," said the old man, gesturing widely with both gnarled hands. His words echoed off the cold, hollow metal surfaces that surrounded them. From where the Bernard stood, it looked like the old man had a large hunch back and it cast an eerie

shadow against the rusted Dumpster behind him. "There's more heat than we can use ourselves, isn't that right Oscar?"

Bernard peered down the narrow alleyway, beneath the rusted pipes spanning the gaps overhead toward the dead end which housed the old man, the burning barrel and the dumpster. He didn't see anybody else. *Old coot's been all by himself too long*, he thought to himself as he watched the bent, chuckling old fellow still waving his turkey bone arms that Bernard decided probably couldn't peel a banana without considerable pain and effort come the deep cold of January.

He'd be easy pickings, in other words, if Bernard had been that kind of person. That said, even though Bernard felt more than a little bitter about how his life had panned out over the past year, he had to admit that he had made his own bed. But instead of sleeping in it, he was sleeping without one. He'd get back into one before spring came again, he was sure of it, and he was determined to do it without compromising himself along the way. What he needed now was a little warmth, and companionship would be just fine too, even if it was with an old creep who probably listened to Sinatra in high school. And that meat smelled so good. His stomach did a flip. Shivering, he paced down the shadowy passageway and stopped on the far side of the fire. The heat felt good, and he could feel his joints relax.

"The name's Willie, and I've been watching you comin' for a long time. And don't think we didn't see you sizing us up on your way over here," he said through a mouthful of meat. What had looked like a large hunch on the old man's back turned out to be a stack of coats of all sizes and colors folded neatly and secured with an old leather belt neatly just below his armpits.

"I wouldn't say sizing…"

"Either way," Willie interrupted. "I'd say you have us at a disadvantage," he said, pointing his half-eaten skewer at Bernard. Willie turned around, lifted the Dumpster's lid and threw the rest in. Then he licked his fingers and flashed a smile that reminded Bernard of a broken picket fence.

Bernard thought he could hear something scrabbling inside the big metal box.

"Oh yeah? I thought you got the drop on *me* back there." although that's not what he was thinking. But, homeless or not, manners dictated you have to humor an old man; ask him if he's going out tonight causing trouble; say things like "Lock up your daughters! Willie's out on the prowl!" Try to make him forget that he's as ineffectual as a squirt gun in a war zone. Minding his manners and humoring old men were among the things that Bernard knew would help him to keep feeling normal until he *was* normal again. "I guess what I mean to say is that I don't understand…"

"Names," said the old man, cutting Bernard off again, rubbing his hands over embers that glowed like little suns inside the metal barrel. "A man's name is just about all he has, unless he has a family or a good friend. And you know mine. You look like a Steven, or a Daniel to us."

"Bernard," said the young man. He took a moment to look to his left and his right and a risked quick peek behind. He didn't see anybody. He decided against asking whether or not they had company; he didn't want to confuse Willie anymore than he already seemed to be--or worse yet, provoke him. He'd only been outdoors for a few months, but he'd found out early in his vagrancy that these stringy old bastards could be a lot of trouble once you got them riled up.

"Oh well, I've been wrong before, Bernie. And I promise you, I'll be wrong again. It's good to be wrong sometimes. Sometimes, I even need to be wrong. That's the nature of this life. So what's your country song, Bernie?"

"Country song?"

"Almost every bum has one. Heartbreak. Trains. Booze. Run-ins with the L-A-Double U. Et cetera," said Willie with a laugh that sounded to Bernard an awful lot like an electric pencil sharpener or an old car trying to start. The stack of folded overcoats on Willie's back bounced and leaned precariously over Willie's shoulders.

Bernard couldn't help but recoil at the personal nature of Willie's questions, but he supposed that if he stayed out here long enough that he'd learn to laugh about a great many things that he didn't think were funny now. Better to keep things light, thought Bernard as he allowed himself a strained chuckle. Better than the alternative. "That's clever Willie, but I only sing when I'm winning. Besides, we don't have a guitar or cheap beer, or even an old dog to kick."

"Suit yourself," said Willie. "I can tell you're new to camping out, but you'll be singing it before you know it. They all do. It wasn't a fair question anyway, since I don't have much of a sad country song of my own to sing. Tough to be sad when you're exactly where you want to be."

"You like it here?" asked Bernard, trying not to sound too astonished.

"I never called any one place my home. Never much wanted to. We stay in one place long enough and it starts to shrink in on our sides, so when it starts to feel like we're getting too big for that place, we just shed it off and move on to the next place. You learn to survive, eventually. You can learn a lot from your friends if you watch closely. Everything I need is right here," he pointed to his head. "And right here," he pointed to the Dumpster.

Bernard tried to wrap his mind around the idea that anybody would want to live out there in the cold--out there in the dark. He jumped a little when Willie shoved out a long guffaw and slapped the side of the big metal box. Bernard thought he could hear something stir inside, and imagined Willie sleeping at the bottom of that cold, dark tin can night after night. Cold, dark, and infested. The first dumpster Bernard had tried to make his bed in had been full of feral cats. He thought of that scrabbling sound and wondered what Willie was sharing his space with.

"Hell, if I hadn't discovered what's really important in life by now, I'd be one little dog lost--or worse. Isn't that right, Oscar?" said Willie.

"Is there someone else here?" asked Bernard. As much as he hated to risk agitating the old fart with questions that might challenge whatever reality he'd constructed, he felt his discomfort starting to outweigh his sense of decency.

Willie ignored him--stared past him into the blackness. "You can't have it all, but you can have some if you're careful, because the doors you open to be free are the same doors that can swallow you up whole."

"Look around, Willie. This isn't red China. You're free to get whatever you can."

"Ah, but there's a big price to pay for all of that freedom. Even if it don't cost a dime, it isn't free. Let's say you get yourself a big house, and a big car and a big pool. That's one kind of freedom. You're free to sleep warm at night or take a dip in your fancy pool, but you're spending nine to five under fluorescent lights."

Bernard thought of mornings in the eat-in kitchen reading the paper and directing strategic planning meetings at his job at the agency. A heavy feeling, like a stone, grew in his stomach.

"Don't you try to tell me it isn't Wild Kingdom in a cracker box there, Bernie. Don't you dare try it. Not when you people grab for promotions with one hand and slit each other's throats with t'other. Why? You've got to feed the mortgage monster. You do. So you feed him until one day your life has mostly passed you by and you have to admit to yourself that you'll do absolutely anything--anything at all, just to keep on walking. Keep on breathing. That's life wherever you are, whether you've got a roof over your head or you don't. Some just realize it sooner than others," said Willie.

"For you, maybe, but not for me. I used to have a good life. *The* good life. Won't be long now before I get it all back," said Bernard.

"A-ha! Now we're getting somewhere. I knew I could get you to do it. You're singing your country song. And I took a train out of Kentucky…the day that my wife left me..."

Willie sang. Bernard heard the sound inside the dumpster again.

"And what about all of this good life? What about the people you love, Bernie? What about your friends? Is there going to be any place for them in your big new house?"

"I told you I didn't want to talk about it," snapped Bernard in a flash of anger, thinking of his wife and his little girl. He thought about how easy it was for him to gamble everything away, and for what? To validate his waning manhood? To satiate his curiosity? He didn't know.

"Well then," Willie said, poking the fire. "Just look at me, flapping my gums like a nursing home nanny. Always too much to say, and besides, what does an old vagrant like me know about life? Isn't that what you're thinking? You're thinking someone without many teeth in his mouth ain't got much sense in his head. You think I'm crazy, or lying or both. Even if you lived in Trump Tower you'd be wrong. But I'm not lying--not one bit." said Willie, raising his voice, and Bernard was sure he saw the Dumpster rock on its wheels.

"I never said…" began Bernie.

"You didn't need to," Willie interrupted again. "You want to know the secret of life? Wasn't sure when I met you whether or not I really wanted to show you, but now I can sense you're a man who needs to know. You're wondering what it all means. You want answers. I've got it all right here in this metal box. And as long as I take care of my secret, it takes care of me," he said, beaming.

Bernie could hear the scraping sound against the metal, and the little piece of his mind that was still a scared little furry thing screamed a warning.

Willie turned around and lifted the lid of the metal trash box. It was only up about three inches before a set of long, red, plated legs flung it the rest of the way.

"I get it, Bernie, and people like you never will. The secret of life is knowing that home isn't no place, but wherever you make it. It's friends. You keep hold of them no matter what. You house them when you can. You comfort

them when they're uncomfortable," Willie said, stepping back as the creature rose from the Dumpster. "You feed them when they're hungry."

Bernard pedaled his feet backward on the ragged concrete as the segmented legs spilled forward. The Dumpster's wheels lifted off the ground when Oscar shifted his massive body forward onto his big red legs. The metal groaned and shifted forward on top of Oscar's body as the bulky creature's feet found their footing on the broken concrete of the alleyway.

Bernard remembered back to one happy afternoon, before he ruined everything, when he took his little girl Diana, to the pet store. He was studying a thankful of tropical fish in one of the big saltwater tanks when he heard Diana yell, "Daddy! Daddy! This spider has a shell! Ucky!" Bernard remembered walking over to where Diana was, kneeling down in front of an aquarium that didn't have any fish or water inside of it. Just sand and the colorful shells of twenty hermit crabs. That's what he thought about as Oscar surged forward and clamped one of its massive purple claws around Bernard's shoulders.

Bernard felt himself moving forward toward the big black eyes sitting on top of long red stalks--eyes which regarded him with detached indifference. Bernard saw the open maw full of brushy, moving parts spring into motion. He screamed and screamed.

"Now you're really singing! Told you you'd sing!" said Willie.

Bernard sang out until the other purple claw closed itself around his neck and squeezed. Then he said nothing at all.

The big crab picked at Bernard's carcass with the jittery meticulousness passed on to him through millions of years of evolution until the upper torso was just clean, white bones.

"Now, now. Mind your manners and save some for Willie," he said as he picked up the leg that hadn't been

gnawed and propped it against to the burning barrel. One of Oscar's claws snapped as it made a lazy grab at the departing limb. Willie smiled and thought Bernard's leg would make a nice roast tomorrow. And, with a little luck, the smell of cooking meat would call someone else in, too. Oscar had a big appetite.

"There. Isn't that better now? I told you I wouldn't let us go hungry tonight. Daddy loves you, Oscar. Yes he does," cooed Willie, stroking a leg that was longer than his own arm.

The crab leaned into Willie's touch, preening and cleaning the last scraps of Bernard (what appeared to be part of a foot, along with some intestines) from his two big front claws.

"Come on now, let's walk, but be careful not to let anyone see you," said Willie, knowing that Oscar liked to stretch his legs just after he took his meal. Oscar had enjoyed his walks ever since he was small enough to house himself in sea shells, when all it took were a few laps around Willie's palm. Willie wondered how large Oscar might someday grow. There was no telling, really. What he did know was this: if a creature such as Oscar could feel love, that's what Oscar felt.

The Dumpster's top hatch clicked against Oscar's hard exoskeleton and marked the seconds as the two of them made their way side-by-side down the alley, out of the firelight and into the darkness.

'Big Sister's get what they Deserve'

Kathryn Ehrlich



Amber grabbed her little sister's doll out of its seat around the small child-size play table. Her little sister squealed in protest, "No, not Suzie!" Dahlia's small frame leaped out of her child-size chair, which was then knocked over. Amber was grinned a devilish grin as she easily held 'Suzie' out of Dahlia small grubby hands.

"Give her back, Ambie!" little Dahlia cried out as her bottom lip began to tremble in sorrow and anger.

"Not by the hair on my chinny, chin, chin!" laughed Amber. "Don't call me Ambie, D! I won't give her back until you say my name right!"

Dehlia stopped jumping to grab her doll. She was becoming *very* angry with her older sister. It just wasn't fair that she was so much taller! It was so stupid, too, that Dehlia couldn't finish her tea parties without always being interrupted by Amber. So what if Dehlia sometimes called Amber Ambie-that's what sister's do! Amber called her D, anyway. That wasn't *even* close to Dehlia!

The little sister suddenly sat down on the floor and started pouting. She couldn't help but hold an internal monologue with other parts of her brain about how absurdly unfair older sisters really were.

"Awww, did 'lil Deedee give up on her 'lil dolly?" Amber mocked, while glaring down at the fat blob that was her little sister. "It couldn't be that little round Dee couldn't lift her fat ass off the floor, could it?" she cooed.

Dehlia's face was turning red as she seethed in her small anger. She wasn't fat! If anything she looked sickly; her collar bone and ribs jutted out under her skin making her look like a skeleton with a thin sheet draped over it.

Little Deedee's anger started to break into something uncontrollable. After all, this same event took place every day. Ever since Amber had a growth spurt last year, she couldn't help but play infuriating tricks on her little sister. Well, today it would have to stop, Dehlia decided. Tomorrow, this would not *happen*!

"Let go of Suzie, give her back!" Dehlia tried to sound threatening. She lowered her voice and added a small growl at the end, which sounded more like a whimper.

"Or what? What could you possible do to me?" Amber's voice was a high strung; after all she was older and bigger. Little D couldn't hurt her!

It was then that the transformation started and a deep throated growled came from the floor close to where Dehlia was seated. It said clearly, "Or I'll rip your heart out!" Amber stopped laughing, that noise couldn't have come from her little sister, could it? In the next moment, Suzie lay on the floor nearly forgotten and Amber found herself in more pain than she ever thought possible. She wanted to scream, but her throat didn't seem to be working. But her eyes were working fine,

Chunks of skin with globs of fleshy red muscle were being torn from Amber's stomach and thighs by the 5 inch long finger nails that had extended from the small hand of her frail sister. Amber could feel the puddle of blood forming

underneath her as her breath shuddered and caught in her throat. The puddle was warm, but growing cool as it began to weigh down the shreds of material that used to be clothes. Amber desperately wanted to struggle, wanted to try and get away, but she couldn't move. Her skin stung like a million bees had inserted a small stinger that pumped poison into her muscles. She felt paralyzed!

Amber's lungs were now beginning to fill with something, something that wasn't air and she couldn't breathe. Amber reached out her hand, a puzzled look on her face as she stretched to remove the sticky green sludge from the Little Deedee's face who was now ripping her a part from the outside in. But her hand faltered as the Dehlia's sharp spine like nails dug deep into her heart, ripping it clear from her chest. Her torso rose off the floor with the force of her heart being wrenched through bone and muscle.

Dehlia laughed, growls erupted from her throat as she held the heart before he sister's eyes just long enough for Amber's brain to catch up with the pain and slide into shock, then death. The last breath escaped out of her body through the holes that had been ripped into her lungs. Her last thoughts were too incoherent for any clear recognition and then there was only darkness, the state of unconsciousness she could never remember because she slept too deeply.

The young sister gripped the heart tightly in her small fist as the green sludge fell away from her face and her finger nails retracted back to a normal length. The child's hair faded from the dark black that had spread from her scalp and down her back when the transformation first started. Soon the chestnut brown curls, which were so similar to her mother's, bounced around her face. Dehlia's green, bright eyes gazed softly at the ripped and damaged heart in her small, bloody hand. Her small lips slipped into a grin and her pink tongue dodged out from between her teeth, licking her lips with hunger and anticipation.

She *had* told her sister that if she didn't give back her doll she would tear her heart out. It's not as if she didn't warn

her, older sisters always got what they deserved anyway. The small girl grabbed her now blood soaked Suzie from the floor beside her very dead sister and walked back over to her tea party. Little Deedee placed her doll in its proper chair, propping it up just so. She placed the heart on the small serving dish that came with the tea set she had gotten the Christmas before. Using the dull plastic silverware that came with her kitchen set, she slowly and painfully cut the heart into smaller chunks, which she then served to Suzie, her teddy, her most precious Barbie, and then herself.

'Tooth'

Philip Harris



Alice Clark was lying on top of a snow covered mountain, making snow angels with Johnny Depp, when the scream hit her.

At first she thought it the call of a yeti, then reality seeped into her consciousness and she realised it was Julia, her daughter. Adrenaline flooded her system and moments later she was running out of her bedroom, dressing gown in hand.

Julia was sitting up in bed, her right hand pressed against her jaw, the Winnie-the-Pooh lamp already glowing softly on the cabinet beside her bed. She was still screaming, tears streaming down her face, when Alice burst into the room.

"What's the matter?" asked Alice, already terrified for her daughter.

Julia choked off the scream and tried to reply. Her breath hitched in her chest and her mouth quivered as she fought to find the words to answer her mother. Then her eyes crumpled and she began to scream again.

Alice rushed forward and sat on the bed, pulling her daughter towards her, trying desperately to squeeze the pain away.

"It's okay, sweetie, it's okay," she whispered, knowing it wasn't.

Julia pushed against her mother's shoulder, burying her cries. Her body shuddered as she struggled to breathe and Alice could feel her daughter's heart pounding against her chest. Her shoulder was already damp from the tears and she gently smoothed Julia's sweat soaked curls away from her forehead, trying to calm her.

"Just tell me what the matter is and we can fix it right up."

"T-tooth-h-hurts," Julia sniffed, her breath coming in short, shuddering gasps.

"Okay, okay, that's good."

Gently, Alice eased her daughter upright. The pain seemed to have died down and Alice began to relax; teeth could be fixed. Then she saw the blood bubbling from her daughter's mouth.

Julia's face was bleached white and had a waxy sheen to it, no doubt caused by the loss of the blood that coated her neck and was soaked into her pyjamas. The smiling sheep that had, up until recently, been drifting lazily through a cloudless, pastel blue sky were now being overwhelmed by a steadily growing Rorschach stain.

Alice's own blood ran cold and the world around her receded as terror washed away the relief she'd felt just moments before. Trying to hide her own fear, she looked at her daughter.

"Julia. Look at me."

Julia's eyes drifted around the room.

"Julia! Look at me," Alice lifted her daughter's bloodied chin. Eventually, Julia's gaze reached her mother.

Alice felt a tidal wave of sadness break over her, threatening to overwhelm them both. Julia's eyes were glassy and lost focus every few seconds, only to regain it a moment

later. She coughed softly and a thin dribble of blood trickled out of her mouth and dropped like a scarlet spider onto Alice's hand. Choking back a rising wave of panic, Alice forced some semblance of calm into her voice.

"Don't worry."

Julia's eyes drifted closed.

"Julia! Listen to me. I know it hurts but you're going to be okay. I'm going to take you to see the doctor. It's just a little ride in the car. Not far. You can see if you can see any squirrels. Okay?"

Julia's eyes flickered open and for a moment Alice thought she saw a spark of interest, just before her daughter's eyes drifted closed again. Julia's head grew heavy and her body relaxed.

"Julia! Please, honey. Just a few minutes more. Okay?" Alice begged softly as she tilted her daughter's chin upwards.

A few seconds later, just as Alice was about to start checking for a pulse, Julia opened her eyes. With some effort, she pulled her chin away from her mother's grip, smearing blood across her cheek. Slowly Julia nodded; then she moaned softly as her face twisted in pain and she buried her head back into her mother's shoulder.

Alice wiped her hand on the bed and stood up, trying not to jolt her precious cargo, "Good. Let's go."

* * *

Alice pulled the passenger seatbelt across her daughter. Ziggy, Julia's toy cat, was huddled on the back seat of the car and Alice reached across and retrieved it. She stared at it for a moment, its doleful face reflecting her own despair, then slipped it onto her daughter's lap. By the time she'd walked round to the driver's side of the car and clipped her own seatbelt into place Julia was clutching Ziggy, her head resting against the window, eyes scanning the nearby trees for squirrels.

Alice forced herself to stay calm as she backed out of the driveway, resisting the urge to just fling the car into the road. The hospital was five minutes away, less if the traffic lights were green; there was no need to risk an accident. The road was clear and Alice accelerated up the hill, wheels spinning slightly on the frost coated tarmac.

The first set of lights were green but the second set turned red as Alice reached them. She could see the hospital a few hundred feet down the road and there were no other cars in sight so she accelerated through the red light, barely registering the flash of the traffic camera as she passed.

Seconds later, tyres crunched gravel as she pulled into the hospital car park. Alice cursed as she scanned a confusing array of signs for some indication of where to go. Rounding the corner of the hospital she spotted an ambulance parked by a set of double doors. Two men in green overalls were loading a stretcher into the back of it and Alice pulled up behind them, tapping her horn twice to get their attention.

The men turned, glaring at her until they saw the girl sitting in the passenger seat. They were at the passenger door before Alice. Julia looked around, confused and scared and looking for her mother.

"It's okay, I'm here," Alice said, and to the men, "Her name's Julia. There's something wrong with her tooth. Or her teeth, or her mouth, I don't know."

"Okay, let's get her inside. Steve, go ahead and warn them we're on our way."

The other man, Steve, nodded and ran through the double doors. Alice opened the car door, freed Julia and gently lifted her out.

"Okay, Julia," said the first man, smiling, "my name's Alan, we're going to get you inside so that you can see a doctor."

Julia nodded. She seemed brighter, more alert than she had a few minutes earlier and Alice allowed herself a little hope.

"Right, pop her on the stretcher. It'll be more comfortable."

A metal trolley appeared and Alice slowly laid Julia on top of it, desperate not to hurt her. Alan grabbed the metal handle at one end and began to push.

Julia tried to smile but it turned into a wince as the movement reawakened the pain.

Alice held open the door as Alan pushed the stretcher inside, "my name's Alice."

Alan smiled again, it was the smile of someone who knew everything was going to be fine. "Hi, Alice. Don't worry, she'll be right as rain before you know it."

They made it into the operating theatre before Julia started screaming again.

Julia lay on a thickly padded operating table, her head resting on a pillow. A heart monitor beeped softly in the corner. The doctor, who had introduced himself as Doctor Reynolds, the hospital's dental specialist, was standing to one side, pulling on a pair of latex gloves as a young nurse tied the back of the pale blue gown he was wearing. A stainless steel trolley sat alongside the table with a terrifying array of scalpels and probes and mirrors lined up on top of it. A tiny drill, much like a dentist's, hung from a hook on one corner of the trolley, its power cable snaking out of sight under the table. An older nurse stood quietly next to the trolley.

Julia eyed the drill nervously. At some point the nurses had tried to clean her face and neck but she was still smeared with red. She was still holding Ziggy by the scruff of the neck; she'd screamed even harder when the young nurse had tried to take him away.

The doctor moved towards the table as Julia screamed again. Her voice was hoarse and a thick rivulet of blood dribbled out of her mouth. Fresh tears ran down Alice's cheeks as she looked at her daughter, convinced she was watching her die. She didn't realise the doctor was talking to her until he touched her gently on the shoulder. "Mrs. Clark.

Could you go to the head of the table? Talk to her, try to keep her calm."

Alice nodded and moved round the table. She leant down and began to stroke Julia's forehead, whispering random snatches of comfort. She talked about Ziggy; about the trip they were going to take to the Christmas shop in London and about how well Julia was doing, how brave she was. Anything to take her daughter's mind off the pain. Anything to try to clear the terror from her eyes.

Doctor Reynolds moved to the table and flicked on a halogen light that hung from the ceiling, "Right then, let's take a look. Can you open your mouth for me, Julia?"

He slipped his rubber coated fingers inside her mouth and peered inside.

"Nurse Branagan, we're going to need some suction."

The older nurse reached under the table and returned with a long plastic pipe attached to a rubber tube. There was a click and an electric pump shuddered into life. Julia stiffened.

"It's okay, sweetie," Alice said softly, "it's nothing to be afraid of. It's just like the Hoover at home. The doctor's going to suck all that horrible stuff out of your mouth so that he can see how to make you better."

The nurse reached forward and slipped the pipe into Julia's mouth. There was a moist sucking sound as the tube slurped down blood and spit and Alice was relieved the rubber tube wasn't transparent.

The doctor leaned forward again and gently eased Julia's mouth open further. Alice watched him, trying to read the expression on his face. He reached up and adjusted the position of the light, then picked up a wooden tongue depressor that looked a lot like a lollypop stick. The doctor rummaged around in Julia's mouth for several minutes, twisting and poking with the depressor. Julia's cheek seemed swollen and Alice could feel her tense as she fought against the pain.

Suddenly the doctor jerked backwards, as though he were suddenly afraid of his patient. Alice looked up, "What?"

The doctor frowned, "Nothing. Nothing to worry about."

Out of the corner of her eye Alice caught the young nurse glancing at the older one, a concerned look on her face.

Nurse Branagan glared back, and gave her head a slight shake.

The doctor seemed to regain his composure and looked across at the older nurse, "we'll need some lidocaine."

Then he crouched down, rested his elbows on the side of the bed so that he was level with Julia and smiled, "Okay, Julia. I think I can see what the problem is. A piece of bone has worked its way into your gum. Have you eaten any fish or chicken recently?"

Julia shrugged, wincing, and the doctor looked towards Alice.

Alice shook her head, "she had a McDonalds yesterday, but she had a burger.

Doctor Reynolds shrugged, "Not to worry, it could have come from anywhere. Anyway, I don't think it's a big problem. We're just going to numb your mouth a little bit, Julia; just like the dentist does. It will sting a little I'm afraid but then all the pain will go away and I can sort you out. Okay?"

Julia looked at her mother for reassurance, then, having received it, she nodded.

The doctor stood up again, "Don't worry, Mrs. Clark, it's nothing to worry about."

Alice let out a deep breath and forced a smile.

Nurse Branagan returned and handed the doctor a syringe and a small capsule of clear liquid. Alice blanched. She'd always been afraid of needles.

"Okay, Julia, I need you to hold very still, just for a few seconds," said the doctor.

Julia gave a little moan as the doctor moved the needle into her mouth and Alice could see her toes curling inside her striped socks.

The doctor frowned. Alice could see him shifting the position of the needle, adjusting the angle as he tried to push it into Julia's gum. He peered past his hand, the frown deepening. He pushed harder and Alice felt Julia tense. She was about to call out, to tell the doctor to stop, when she heard a quiet cracking sound and the needle slid into the soft pink tissue. A few seconds later the doctor stepped away from the table and gave the young nurse the empty syringe.

"Right then, we'll give that a few minutes to do its work."

Alice closed her eyes, willing the pain to fade quickly, praying she would get her daughter safely out of this room. The antiseptic smell that filled the air couldn't quite mask the underlying bitterness and Alice became intensely aware that this was a room where people died.

There was a muffled shout and a face appeared at the window of the operating room. The man's ruddy face was covered with dozens of cuts and bruises. Thick clumps of grey hair sprouted from either side of his head and Alice could see his mouth working, spitting out words she couldn't hear. His hands clawed at the window in frustration, leaving dark smears across the glass. His incoherent rambling grew louder as two nurses appeared from behind him and gently steered him away. Nurse Branagan flicked a set of blinds closed. She was about to apologise for the interruption when a shrill keening filled the air.

It was several seconds before Alice realised she was the one making the noise. She was staring at Julia in horror as blood poured out of her mouth. Julia wheezed and coughed and spluttered, desperately trying to drag air into her lungs. Alice tried to help her sit up, her hands slipping on the blood slick skin, then screamed as a split appeared in Julia's right cheek. Julia arched her back. There was a crash as the young nurse knocked over the trolley as she stumbled backwards.

The tear in Julia's cheek widened and Alice felt herself drift towards unconsciousness as a dozen black grubs wriggled out of the gash. They lay on the bed, blindly twisting and turning and rolling as the medical staff looked on, frozen with horror.

Alice was about to flick the grubs onto the floor when Julia screamed again. Blood spattered the bed and a metallic tang filled the air as her cheek burst open and something grey and bloody clawed its way out. The thing, the creature, whatever it was, dragged itself out of the side of Julia's mouth in a riot of blood and tissue and Alice watched in horror as it crawled to the edge of the table and dropped to the floor.

The creature was thin; about three inches in length, most of that taken up by a dozen bony segments that formed its spine-like tail. Its translucent body was wrapped in a bony exoskeleton and Alice could see the shadow of some unknown organ pulsing between the curves of its ribcage.

Two bulbous, lidless eyes dominated its skull-like head, the yellow spheres blown out of proportion to the rest of its bony features. Its lower jaw was elongated, a set of teeth hooked upwards from the end. One tooth was broken and Alice could imagine it embedded somewhere in her daughter's cheek.

A pair of translucent wings, crumpled and wet with blood, sprouted from its back and they twitched slightly as it sat on the floor.

There was a retching sound from the corner of the room as the younger nurse threw up.

Slowly the creature lifted itself up onto its skeletal legs, leaving spidery trails of blood on the white tiles. The front pair of legs were smooth, much shorter than the other three sets, which were covered with vicious barbs and ended in talons that tapped against the floor as it moved.

The creature flicked its front legs over its head to clear blood from its eyes and looked slowly from side to side, surveying its new environment.

There was a metallic scraping sound and Alice saw the doctor lifting a large metal dish from the floor near the fallen trolley.

The creature hissed, the harsh sound clearly audible. It turned its head towards the doctor, its jaw dropping open as two tongues flicked out into the antiseptic tinged air. The rubbery tendrils darted left and right then disappeared again. The creature hissed a second time and its tail arched upwards as a thin spine slid from the end. It began to move unsteadily towards the doctor, its hind legs trailing behind it.

The creature got a dozen steps before the remaining legs on its left side gave way and it collapsed. The doctor slowly advanced on the creature as it lay there, futilely flailing its tail against the floor, trying to right itself.

Gradually the movement slowed, then stopped, and a thick pool of black mucus began to seep from underneath the creature's body. Alice saw the tips of its legs twitch one last time as the doctor dropped the metal dish over the corpse. Alice and the doctor stared at each other, looking for answers.

Then the steady pulse of the heart monitor switched to a high pitched whine and all hell broke loose.

Breaking and Entering

Stephanie Scarborough



The first thing that had to go was the faded painting of dogs playing poker. Then velvet Elvis. I lifted the former off the peeling, water-stained wall and tossed it onto the floor. The house's previous occupant obviously had questionable tastes. My boyfriend, Troy, was in the master bedroom, gleaning the proverbial wheat from the chaff.

"Hey, Clem, check this out!"

Troy's psyched voice echoed down the long, dark hallway. There was no electricity, so all we had to see by was the sunlight that streamed through the dirty, cracked windows. I worked my way down the black tunnel of a hall to the master bedroom. Troy stood before a dilapidated dresser with an ornate, cracked mirror. "Look what I found in the dresser drawer." He held something out before me. With his haphazardly styled black hair, bleach-white skin, and smudged black eyeliner, Troy looked right at home in the decaying Victorian bedroom.

A thin shaft of light hit the object just right, and I saw that it was a diamond ring. And it wasn't some puny, two-months'-salary-special. It was a rock. Something you could knock someone unconscious with.

Were I more of a girly girl, I'd probably squeal and get all sentimental, but I was far more interested in its monetary value than its function as a fashion accessory.

"Sweet!" I stepped closer to examine it in what little light there was. The band was silver—maybe white gold—and engraved with angular, art deco flowers. The diamond itself was rectangular and, as I mentioned previously, huge.

"Why don't you wear it," Troy suggested, "so we don't lose it." I tried sliding it on my middle finger, then my ring finger, then finally my pinky, which it barely fit.

It was a tiny band, and I'm not a skinny waif like Troy.

Troy continued digging through the dresser drawers, searching for anything else we could use or sell. I didn't see the need to keep looking after finding this.

"Find anything in the other room?" Troy asked.

"Just a really bad painting of dogs playing poker and a velvet Elvis."

Troy stopped rummaging. "A velvet Elvis? That's so kitsch! That would look awesome in my bedroom." I was suddenly a little ashamed to be Troy's girlfriend.

"Let's take a look at it," he said. I rolled my eyes and led him back to the room where I'd been.

The velvet Elvis was still there, unfortunately, but the discarded dogs playing poker painting was no longer on the floor where I'd left it.

"I am so taking the velvet Elvis," Troy said. "Scoff all you want, but I like it."

"Troy," I said, "something's missing."

"What?"

"The picture of the dogs playing poker. I left it on the floor."

"Are you sure?" He took the velvet Elvis off the wall, a triumphant smile on his lightly glossed lips.

"Yes." I looked around, lifting up random debris on the wood floor, finding nothing except dirt, bent nails, and . . . fresh, red rose petals. I was sure those weren't here earlier. They were strewn in a path that led to the one window in the

room. "These are new," I said, holding up a handful of the petals. "I wonder where they came from."

Troy shrugged, leaning his velvet Elvis against the wall. We both peered out the open window. The trail of rose petals continued on the ground outside.

"Whatever," Troy said. "Let's just finish searching the house and get outta here."

"Yeah. I'll check the kitchen. You take the attic." I lingered at the window a few seconds longer. The petals continued down a dirt path that cut through the overgrown back yard, and I could have sworn I saw something moving in the tall, shaggy grass. "Clementine, you comin'? If someone else is really here, we gotta work fast."

"Yeah. Sorry." I headed for the kitchen, telling myself that whatever was in the grass was probably just a squirrel or a bird. I rummaged through the drawers, looking for fine silver; useful gadgets or appliances; valuable china or anything else worth taking. I found a half dozen tarnished silver spoons, but not much else worth messing with. Troy bounded down the stairs while I scoped out a closet near the front door. "Find anything?" I asked.

"Just this old school Polaroid camera. I think it even has film." He tossed it to me. I slid it in my coat pocket. "Still got the ring?"

I held out my pinky. Troy smiled.

"Sweet. Ready to go?"

"Yeah." I shut the closet door and joined him. "Let's check out the back yard really quick. I thought I saw something out there." I was curious about those petals. He shrugged and followed me out the back door. The petals were still on the ground. They ran down a narrow dirt path through the untamed grass and weeds. I followed the trail.

"Clementine, c'mon. We need to get outta here before someone sees us."

"Hang on," I said. "It'll only take a sec. I wanna see where the petals came from."

Troy groaned impatiently, but I ignored him and continued following the rose petals. They kept going, deeper and deeper into the wild tangle of unkempt plant life. Troy trudged along behind me, sighing impatiently every few steps. Eventually, the petals came to a stop right next to the dogs playing poker painting lying in the dirt.

"See," I said. "I was right. Someone took it." We stared at the painting.

"That's a terrible piece of art," he said. "I'd ditch it, too."

"I wonder who took it." I looked around. Something rustled in the overgrown grass. Troy and I exchanged nervous glances.

"Hello?"

More rustling ensued.

"Let's scram," Troy said, taking me by the arm. The activity in the grass continued, more violently. Troy and I tore back down the path back towards the house, our Docs pounding the fresh petals into the dirt. As we fled, I heard something else—a slippery, writhing sound. I looked back and saw a girl, maybe 13 or 14 years old, with milky skin and long, wavy black hair. She bent down to pick up the painting. I slowed down.

"Clem, why are you stopping?" Troy turned around, slowing down when he saw what I saw. There wasn't much to be afraid of. She was a kid. She also looked like she was on her way to a renaissance festival with her long, black velvet dress with ruffly white trim.

"Are you lost?" I asked. She didn't answer. She picked up the painting and looked at the back of it. A slight smile curved her thin, shrimp-colored lips. I stepped a little closer wondering what about the cheesy picture intrigued her.

"C'mon, Clem. Let's go." Troy took me by the arm. The girl walked toward us, painting still in hand. Something unnatural slithered out from under the girl's dress—something green. I couldn't imagine what it might be. Maybe it was just a garden snake or the overgrown grass. We made it

back to the back porch. The girl followed, and I could tell that the green thing I had seen under her skirt wasn't a snake —there were several of them now. They looked like . . . tentacles? I had to be seeing things.

"What's that?" Troy whispered. Before I could answer, the girl's dress burst apart, revealing green thorns more writhing tentacles. The girl was no longer human, but a red-eyed, green-skinned beast. I urged Troy to keep moving. The monster slithered closer. As it neared us, I could see long, black hair hanging from the back of its oblong head.

"I dunno," I said. "Just get inside. Hurry!"

Troy and I burst through the back door and slammed it shut behind us. I fumbled with the locks, securing the deadbolt and sliding the chain lock into place. We fled to the living room and waited.

"Do you still have the Polaroid?" Troy asked. "If we see it again, take a picture. That would be worth some dough."

I pulled the camera out of my coat pocket. "Maybe we should just leave while we're safe," I said. "We've got the ring. That'll get us plenty."

"No way, Clem. We've gotta get a picture of this thing." Despite his façade of bravery, I could feel Troy shaking like a leaf under his black leather jacket.

The door rattled and cracked. I held onto Troy, wishing we were anywhere but here. The door's brittle wood split down the center. Within seconds, the creature burst through the splintered door and crawled towards us on its tentacle legs, which I could now see more closely resembled vines. Its mouth opened, revealing rows of thorns.

"Take the picture, damn it!" Troy cried as it got closer. "Take the picture so we can get the hell outta here!"

I aimed the camera at the creature and pressed the shutter button. An undeveloped picture slid out with a

mechanical whirr. While it was still developing, a vine slid out from under the creature and wrapped around Troy's thigh.

"Clem, help!" He tore at the vine with his fingernails. I pocketed the picture, dropped the camera, and tugged at the vine. The creature dragged Troy towards its gaping maw.

My tugging did little to help. I tried pulling him in the opposite direction, but the vine was too strong. Troy slipped out of my grip and I stumbled back into a wall. By the time I had recovered enough to try and save him again, he'd been dragged under the monster's body amid all the writhing vine-tentacles.

"Troy!" I lunged after him and managed to grab his hand, but then he was sucked up into the creature. His fingers slid from my grip, and he was gone. The beast roared and started after me. I ducked into the kitchen nearby and dug through drawers for anything I could use as a weapon. I found a rusted chef's knife and charged toward the abomination, stabbing any part of the monster I could reach —the tentacle legs, the leafy, thorny arms. The creature cried out in pain, and strange, black goo oozed from the wounds.

A vine wrapped around my free hand, yanking me toward the beast. I continued to stab the beast, then at the ever-tightening vine around my wrist. Black sludge shot out as I hacked through the thorny green flesh. The vine around my wrist loosened, and I hit the nasty wood floor with a thud. Once I'd regained my balance and confidence, I plunged the knife into the side of the monster's head. Disgusting goo spewed out with every jab, drenching me.

A thin vine wrapped around my pinky. The ring Troy had found started to slide off, but I had bigger problems. A tentacle wrapped around my waist and flung me across the room. My entire body ached. I had to pause for a moment to catch my breath.

The creature, now bleeding black gunk all over its body, closed in on me.

The ring was no longer on my finger; it was tangled in one of the beast's many vines. I wasn't sure how much longer

I couldn't defend myself—my arms were painfully sore, and the creature's thorns had left red scratches all over my body. I stumbled to my feet and staggered towards the monster. I swung the knife into its neck. Several vines slid around my legs, my waist and chest, my arms, but I focused on getting the rusty knife through the thorny green neck. Like a leaky pipe, more black stuff spewed out the further I hacked through. When I'd gotten the knife three-quarters of the way through, I found myself flying through the room again, only this time the knife stayed lodged in the monster's throat.

Too weak to stand up, I laid there on the sticky, black floor, helplessly awaiting fate. It lumbered towards me, slower than before, its head at 45-degree angle to its body. It ambled within a foot of me, then collapsed to the floor. All its slashed tentacles fell limp. I sat up and examined it, hoping I'd finally killed it.

Its green belly moved. I slowly got to my feet, ripped the knife out of the creature's throat and sliced through the abdomen. Through all the black, tarry goo, I saw a hand—Troy's hand.

"Troy," I rasped, my voice weak, "are you alive?"

He moaned, and I continued slicing the beast open. I hauled Troy's body out and laid him down on the floor.

"Troy, are you okay? Say something!" I wiped as much of the black gunk as I could off his face. "Troy!" He snorted and coughed up a lot of black junk, gasping for breath.

"Where am I?" he whispered. "Am I alive?"

"Yeah. You were inside that thing." I pointed to the monster's corpse. Just then, the slashed body transformed from a slimy, thorny monster into a pile of leaves and rose petals. In the middle of the pile, lay the girl we'd seen earlier. I crawled across the floor and felt her neck. Her skin was chilly, and I couldn't find a pulse. I gently slapped her pallid cheeks, but she didn't respond.

"I think she's dead." I shambled back to Troy. "Let's get outta here. Do you think you can stand up?" I helped him

into a sitting position and eventually got him to his feet. He leaned against the wall for support.

"Do you still have the ring?" he asked weakly.

"No." I looked at the girl and the leaves and rose petals that surrounded her. "Just a sec." The ring was on the girl's finger. I wasn't sure if I should take it or leave it with her. Shaking, I reached down and touched it. A jolt shot through my hand to my entire body, sending me skidding across the floor.

"What was that?" Troy asked.

"C'mon. Let's scram before anything else happens." That ring wasn't worth a second try. I took him by the hand, and we stumbled out the front door.

As we limped away from the house, I reached into my coat pocket for the photo I'd taken. I hadn't seen the final product yet—it was only of the girl, standing in the house with a horrified look on her face.

The Lake Pact

David Bernstein



He saw the creature lunge from the depths of Beaver Dam Lake, wrap its scaly long arms around the woman in the canoe and pull her under. It was only a moment, but the image would stay in his mind forever, as if branded there. The creature had dark olive colored scales, large bulbous black eyes and gills down its sides.

Billy wasn't supposed to go near the lake. His mother told him it was dangerous, especially without an adult. No one from the neighborhood used the lake. Only outsiders were seen swimming and boating, parking their cars alongside Lake Road, and enjoying themselves in one of nature's pools.

Billy was never told why he or any of the other neighborhood kids weren't allowed by the lake. Every time he asked his father, he received the same response: "Because I said so."

The woman in the canoe was a visitor. Everyone knew everyone from the neighborhood and Billy didn't recognize her. Apparently she'd never learned the basic rules of swimming: never do it alone. He doubted it would've mattered if she had one other person or ten. She would still be dead. He'd seen her Jeep parked along the road on his way toward the lake. He stood from his hillside position, legs trembling, and went home.

The next day, while sitting on the school bus, Billy passed the spot where the woman's Jeep had been parked. It was gone. He felt an uneasiness fall over him, a creeping dread. He should've told his parents about the woman, but he didn't want to get punished and they most likely wouldn't have believed him anyway. A belt whipping combined with a grounding was never welcomed.

"I saw something," he said to his best friend Mack as they sat alone at the end of a lunchroom bench.

"Your sister naked?" Mack asked, laughing.

Billy reached over the table and nailed him in the arm. "No, something awful and unbelievable."

"Your mother naked?" Mack asked, avoiding Billy's fist.

"I'm serious."

"What was it?"

Billy leaned in, whispering, "I saw a woman get killed yesterday."

"Bullshit," Mark said, shoving his sandwich into his mouth.

"I went down to the lake," Billy said, coldly.

Mack stopped chewing and with a full mouth said, "Beaver Dam Lake?"

"You know any other?"

Mack quickly finished chewing and swallowed. "Your parents would've killed you if they found out you went there."

"I know."

"So, what happened?" Mack asked, his attention solely on Billy.

Billy told him what he saw, and how the woman's Jeep was gone the next day.

"I want to see it," Mack said, eager-eyed.

"See it? We have to kill it."

"Kill it?"

"Yeah," Billy said. "It must be why no one from the neighborhood goes swimming or boating."

"You think they know about the creature?"

"No, it'd be all over the news if they did. I think people must go disappearing or get found mutilated, so people simply stay away. They probably don't tell us kids because they don't want to scare us with grisly tales."

"Wait a minute," Mack said, adjusting his position and leaning forward. "I've seen people swimming in that lake plenty of times, boating too."

"Yeah, but no one from the neighborhood. They're always outsiders. And what about all the missing posters on the supermarket wall in town? All of them stating how the people were known to have gone to the lake around the time they went missing."

Mack thought for a moment. "You're right," he said. "But how are we going to kill it?"

The two friends spent the rest of the week planning. First they'd need proof that such a creature existed and Billy's dad's camcorder would do the trick. They'd need bait to lure it out of the lake and as much as they wanted to use Jake Burrows, the class bully, they didn't. Instead they settled for Killer, the neighborhood Rottweiler responsible for numerous kids' stitches and scars. They sat in the woods behind the dog's doghouse and learned its schedule.

Killer was put out shortly after nine a.m. and brought back in after six p.m. every day. The Freckers were notorious for going out on Saturdays, leaving Killer all day by himself. It was as if the dog looked forward to Saturday, always chewing through his line and escaping. It was the only day kids knew to stay away from the property. Occasionally someone would get too close to the house and Killer would come charging. Hence the many scarred children and mailmen in the area.

Billy and Mack bought sleeping pills, crushed them up and mixed the contents into pieces of hamburger meat. They snuck into Killer's doghouse at night, placing the bowl in the back of it where the owner wouldn't see it.

The next morning, Saturday, Billy and Mack had gotten up early and sat in the woods behind the Freckers' house and waited.

Killer was brought out at nine and tied to his doghouse. He smelled the hamburger and disappeared inside. He reappeared five minutes later and began stumbling before collapsing to the ground, asleep.

They tied the animal's legs together and placed the heavy dog in a red wagon, covering it with a blanket before hauling him down the road. Billy wasn't sure how long the sleeping pills effect would last, keeping an eye on the blanket the whole time. Upon reaching the path leading to the lake, they pulled the wagon over ruts and rocks before winding up at the water's edge. Killer was dumped from the wagon and his body positioned just along the shoreline. The two boys shoved the wagon behind a patch of tall weeds before climbing half way up the trail and hiding within a bushel of tall grass.

"How do you know it likes dog?" Mack asked.

"I don't," Billy answered, taking the camcorder out of its nylon case, getting it ready to record.

Three hours had gone by. The sun was beaming, the day hot and humid. Their shirts were sticking to them like an extra layer of skin. Mosquitoes buzzed their ears and prodded their flesh.

Another hour passed and the sun was dipping below the horizon. Gnats were now joining in with the mosquitoes and annoying the hell out of the boys.

"I'm gone," Mack said, standing.

"Wait," Billy said, grabbing his wrist to pull him back down. "The creature might see you."

"I've got to eat. I'm starving."

Resigned, starving himself, Billy said, "Fine, we'll try again tomorrow." He packed up the camcorder and slung the strap around his neck.

They walked down to the dog, its stomach still moving as air pumped in and out of its lungs.

"Thought we might've killed him," he laughed. "What now?"

"Well, he's still sleeping. We'll untie his legs and leave him here. He'll find his way home."

Billy bent down and began untying Killer's hind legs while Mack took care of the front ones.

"Damn you're slow," Billy said, standing and making fun of his friend. He noticed a stirring in the water like jets in a hot tub.

"Shit," Mack said, startled as he jumped backward landing in the lake. "The dog's waking up."

Billy watched as two webbed claws appeared out of the water behind his friend.

"Mack," he yelled, trying to warn his friend. "Watch out." The creature's head and shoulders came out of the water with lightning speed. Before he knew it the thing was in the air, flying toward them.

Mack turned around, but it was too late. The creature landed on him and together they splashed into the shallow water, the back of Mack's head hitting the muddy shoreline. The amphibian type creature had a wide sucker-mouth. Its bulbous eyes had no pupils, reflecting its surroundings like giant onyx marbles. It had no ears that Billy could see and a small dorsal fin on its head. A strong algae odor filled the air.

A guttural, phlegm-like sound came from its mouth before it bit down on Mack's chest. The webbed claws plunged into the boy's sides and seemed to be digging around. Billy charged forward, kicking the creature in its head. It flailed backward, Mack's blood dripping from its maw.

Squealing in anger, the creature pulled its gore covered hands out of Mack's limp body before smashing him in the chest, causing his body to go under the water. Billy tried connecting with another kick to the monster's head, but slipped, landing on his back. The creature sprang out of the water, landing on Mack's dead body, crushing it further before lunging at Billy.

A black streak dashed in front of Billy's eyes. He blinked and saw Killer attacking the creature. The dog had the creature's slimy arm in its mouth. Dark brown ooze, like molasses, seeped from where Killer was gnawing. The creature was squealing.

As monster and dog tussled, Billy scrambled to his feet. The creature grabbed Killer's head and began crushing it. The dog yelped for a second before falling limp. The thing grabbed both of the dog's legs, ripped them off, and tossed them over its head. They landed with a soft splash in the water. Billy turned and ran.

He had never run so fast and for so long in his fourteen years of living. He burst through the downstairs door of his house, out of breath, hands on his knees. His mind raced faster than his pulse. He'd seen his best friend gruesomely killed by some kind of amphibious abomination. And Killer, the dog that had tormented so many neighborhood kids for so many years, dead. Billy wasn't sure if the dog had tried to protect him or had simply saw a formidable foe worth challenging. Either way, the dog died saving his life.

"Billy?" his mother yelled from upstairs. "Is that you?"

His breathing was still rapid, but had slowed somewhat. He plodded up the stairs, his adrenaline still pumping.

"Mom, Dad," he said, no longer caring if he got into trouble. People needed to know about the monster. He entered the kitchen as his parents sat at the table eating.

"What's gotten into you?" his mother asked, holding a fork with a piece of rare-cooked steak on the end of it.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," his father said. "Is that my video camera?"

Ignoring his father's question, Billy blurted out his tale, starting with the woman and her Jeep. He spoke unhindered by his parents, ending with Mack's and Killer's demise.

His parents had stopped eating, cutlery resting on their plates. His father's expression was stoic at first, seeming indifferent to what he had said, but his face quickly reddened as his cheek muscles bulged.

His mother's face paled, tears welling in her eyes. She looked horrified. Had she believed him? Had she known about the creature? She looked away for a moment before turning on him.

"Do you know what you've done?" his mother spat, tears falling down her cheeks.

"I know I'm not supposed to go near the lake, but . . ." Billy was cut short by his father's backhand, the smack loud, and painful like a bunch of bee stings. His father had never hit him so hard before. He'd been whipped on his backside with his father's belt, but the man had never lifted a hand to his face. The hatred in his father's eyes was frightening, worse than any punishment he'd ever been given. Holding his hand to his blistering cheek, Billy watched as his father rose from his chair and cocked back his fist.

"Howard," his mother yelled.

"We have to protect the family. We have a daughter. Remember her? The one away at college?"

Billy shrank back, confused. What the hell were his parents talking about? Protect the family? He closed his eyes as his father's fist came at him. The impact was like a steel pipe colliding with his head before everything went black.

He awoke upright, his head bruised and pounding. Opening his eyes, he saw hundreds of people standing before him, all staring with somber faces. They were all adults from the neighborhood. He tried moving, but found his arms were tied around a wooden post behind his back. His ankles too. Two torches, alight with flame, stood a few feet to either side of him. Night had fallen, the sky was clear, the stars shining bright. The air was humid, and the gentle breeze that was blowing did little to relieve the heat emanating from Billy's body. His father stood before him.

"Let this night be a lesson to us all," he said.

"Dad . . ." Billy said, eyes beginning to tear.

"Keep yourselves and your children away from the lake. Let the wanderers and outsiders supply the Mogroth with food. The pact must not be broken. We've stopped having to sacrifice our own by letting the creature take outsiders."

"Dad, what the hell is going on?" Billy asked, crying and struggling against his bindings.

"You will be quiet, boy," his father said, slapping him across the face. His father turned to face the crowd. "We must be vigil in our lives and honor the pact our fathers and their fathers before them made." He observed the crowd, catching the eyes of many.

"This," he pointed to his son. "This is what will happen to your children if you don't keep them away." Half the onlookers appeared frightened, others angered. "Or worse, the creature will curse us all, leaving our lands and families in ruin." He raised a fist in the air. "Have you forgotten the history of our community?"

The neighborhood knew well the story of its past. Shortly after the village's forefathers settled the land the people began dying. Children didn't live past the age of four. Crops and commerce all but ceased as if the lands were cursed. Something needed to be done.

The people prayed at church on Sundays, but nothing ever changed until a witch came to town. She was passing through, had made plans to stay, but had said it was a place of evil. The town's elders begged her for help, which was unusual, as most witches were driven away or worse, killed.

The witch told the town's elders that a powerful spell would be needed to keep the evil at bay. She gathered a sample of blood from every town resident and made her spell. Using one of the dead and a water serpent, she created the Mogroth.

The Mogroth was a supernatural creature that lived in lakes and swamps, surviving on human flesh. The town would need to sacrifice a human to it at least once every four

months, a small price to pay. In doing so the town's residence would never become sick. Cancer, influenza, plague and all other ailments would never befall them. Their children would grow up healthy and live to an old age and business would always be profitable. The witch warned them against ever raising a hand to the creature, for the consequences would be dire. If a town resident ever meant to harm the Mogroth then that individual would have to be sacrificed to the creature or the entire town would fall into ruin. Incurable disease would befall everyone, crops would die, and prosperity would cease. No matter where they fled, the curse would follow them until death.

Having given the crowd time to reflect, Howard continued. "Let this sacrifice keep the lake pact unbroken." He stepped forward, the crowd parting.

"Dad," Billy cried. He saw his neighbor that had babysat him when he was a young child. "Mrs. Peterson?" He looked to the bystanders, each one averting their eyes, lowering their heads. As his father disappeared into the distance, the crowd closed in following after him. Billy was left alone as his cries dwindled. He continued to struggle uselessly. The crickets and frogs that had been chirping became silent. He heard the water ripple behind him. The silent night air was broken by the low gurgle of the creature's growl. Billy's pants darkened in the crotch as his bladder let loose. He began shaking, screaming for help, his voice echoing, unanswered. The creature's rancid mildew and dead fish breath struck Billy's nose making him gag.

The creature grabbed Billy's left arm and tore it from his shoulder socket. The rope holding his wrists snapped as blood gushed from the gaping hole. He screamed in horror, the pain not settling in yet. He heard a splash, remembering how the creature had tossed Killer's legs after he tore them off. Numbness seemed to fill his body until he felt the creature's mouth close over his neck. Its teeth sunk in, but in a saw-like manner, cutting deep and severing muscle. He felt the warmth of his blood dribble down his neck, coating his

chest and back as the creature chewed and sucked. The monster lifted its head from him, engulfed Billy in a bear-hug and tore him and the post from the ground. It headed back to the water, Billy still alive as he went under. The creature brought his body to its lair and finished its meal. The pact of Beaver Dam Lake remained.

Then Silence

Phillip G Frank Jr



"What a weird river system", I thought, looking at the muddied current rushing beneath the giant hover craft. The river, as rich in hue and texture as brown pudding, swirled and mixed upon itself while rushing down the steep-sided vein of the mountain. My mind muddled with thoughts of why I had been summoned on this trip of secrecy, whilst sitting on the bow of the giant boat. It was all furiously assembled and executed just days before.

"Why would the Collective ask a common herpetologist like me on such a mission?" I wondered as I looked around the boat at the other crew members.

The 'Collective' is an organization of the highest calibre scientists, hired by the Fund for World Wildlife to explore a 'finding.' A 'finding' none of us had any knowledge of, and more importantly me. The fact that I had no affiliations, no family, and was a nobody worked. If I disappeared or got killed, no one would ever notice.

"Perfect," I smirked sarcastically.

I was for utility, and utility was me. I was conveniently suited for the hard and laborious work of a scientists right-hand man; while always seemingly tucked away in the 'acknowledgments' of scientific papers and remaining the unknown linchpin.

"Oh, what the hell, just another day in paradise." I murmured to myself.

* * *

I leaned back against my pack and took in the view around me. The scenery around the river was breathtaking and the forest was ancient, judging by the enormity of the trees. Beautiful and pristine trees that had never seen a lumberman's axe.

"Few places in the world hold a forest such as this." I decided. "Truly a no-man's land."

My mind wandered back to the conversation I'd had with Captain Riddle the night before. Captain Riddle was a boisterous, swaggering chap, and quite the performer. He loudly sang the local drinking songs for anyone who would listen, or not.

While I was harmonizing to his clap-trap he gleefully guided me off to the side, though a bit queasy from all the rum, to tell me a thing or two about the river.

"You see Phil," he burped and looked around to make sure no one was listening in. "I am the only man who can navigate that river...and I'm also the only man who can pilot the kind of hovercraft which can go through those treacherous waters!"

"Why is the river so treacherous Captain? Are there pirates about?"

"Ha!" The Captain laughed heartily spitting right in my face. "This isn't your ordinary river my boy. It doesn't flow most of the time. When it does flow, it flows mud! Hot mud, like what spews up from a hot spring or other volcanic thingy or another."

The Captain swirled his hand around clumsily for added effect. "My boat has a Spectra with Kevlar lining laced with some top-secret military spec something or another, which makes it invulnerable." He beat on the skin as if to

show how tough it was. "This baby can take anything that river can dish out, you betcha."

"Have you ever been up the river before?" Nodding my head in its general direction.

"Yep, six months ago I took a bunch of beardies up there."

"Beardies? " I queried.

"Yes beardies." Riddle wiggled his fingers below his chin as to imitate his ruffling a beard,

"All you scientists have some kind of beard." Riddle concluded.

"I see!" Amused at his observation I waited for him to continue.

"Back then the river was flowing down perfectly, not like usual when it's stiff and thick like chocolate puddin'. When it's like that the damn rocks are showing and they're jagged and sharp like giant serrated steak knives."

"I thought you said your boat could handle anything?"

Captain Riddle looked at me rancorously."Boy!" He shouted loudly, again showering me with spittle."Even God himself couldn't sail up that river when it's like that. Those rocks are like fishing hooks and will snag and hold any craft fast." The Captain quickly stiffened up with pride, "Even if they can't sink it".

Riddle moved in on me quietly and hovered over me like a brooding hen. "Phil, listen here, that place is real creepy you know. Like in those weird movies they like to show back home." Riddle suddenly seemed sober as if he hadn't had a touch of liquor all day. "None of the natives go anywhere near that place. They say its bewitched or something." His deep set eyes stared right into mine, unblinking. "You sure you know what you're getting yourself into my boy?"

All I could do was stare back at him in disbelief. "Where did this come from?" I wondered. He was about to say something else but one of the crew members suddenly

appeared and drew away the Captain with an issue about the boat.

* * *

As I snuggled down deeper into my pack I was brought out of myself by someone calling my name,

"Phil?" Dr. Robin Lawson approached apprehensively. The hover craft was not the ideal way of travel for a man in his seventies.

Robin's proper English accent reported loudly over the engines roar, "The Captain said we are almost there." Robin pointed up the cliff face.

Looking up, my jaw dropped open as if on cue. High up on the cliff was a large dark cave, which seemed like a black hole swallowing the greenery around it.

"That is our destination." Robin grinned while aiming down his finger and wagging it up and down eagerly. He turned back in the direction of his gear while gingerly balancing himself against the boats dance.

* * *

"Spelunking we will go, spelunking we will go , high-ho-the-derry-oh, spelunking we will go". I sang merrily, stuffing the clothes which had shaken loose during the ride back into my pack. Dr. Lawson is the one who had gotten me into things like this before. We have travelled all over the world and have had quite a few adventures together.

It seemed only natural that when the Collective invited him on this trip, he would bring me along.

Robin is a great scientist having pioneered many of the formulas for DNA research making him one of the world's highest ranking PhDs for reviewing scientific papers.

I thought it natural for him to have been invited on a trip like this; however, with his age and being semi-retired , I was wondering why?

The words utilitarian and dispensable kept re-entering my mind. Not he?

The rest of the group consisted of several PhD's; A bird guy, a bug guy, a warm-blooded mammalian guy (who studies other warm blooded mammalians) and other PhDs relating to plants and rocks and things. Then of course there are the geo-physimacallits , you know, the everything else guys. We even have an MD along for the ride. The rest of our group consists of guys similar to me, utilitarian types. However, I think the others may be military or some other government issue as they don't talk much except among themselves. As with every group there is also the big cheese, and yep, he is something else. If you could pick one guy to lead such a diverse group as ours it would have to be him. He calls himself Mr. Smith, and I can't help but think of the movie for which made this name famous a few years ago. He fits the bill. It's not so much in the way he looks or the way he dresses or even his voice or personality. It's just WHO he represents himself as, THE ONE.

As the boat gained on the cliff wall, I noticed an intricate wooden structure made from bamboo and vines. They were fastened into a winding stairway ascending up the face of the cliff to the cave.

"Stairway to heaven," I thought, as I contemplated my utility on this trip. "Well if you gotta go, you gotta go."

"Hey Robin, let's go." I yelled over to him.

The hover craft gently nudged into the rickety dock which was being harassed by the rivers strong current. Robin, licking his lips in anticipation of the climb, jostled up to the front of the boat where I was waiting to give him a leg up. He reminded me of a school boy, eager and cautious, walking into class for the first day of school. "After so many years..." I decided, " He is going into the classroom one more time."

The Militia guys were pouring out of the boat like ants to a feast. Robin was hanging on as the bow suddenly sank two feet below the dock from all the weight. Slowly the

bow returned to its correct height as the last of the crew exited. Relinquishing the boat, we started our ascent of the very creaky, rickety, and wavering stairs. The stairway traversed from left to right creating a steady Z as it crawled up the hillside. After some negotiating, I realized it was extremely well designed and despite its awkwardness it was quite safe. Soon enough we were climbing the stairs like old pros. Robin, although breathless, was having a great time.

"Look at those Dendrofidose vilantias," he puffed while pointing to a large cluster of vines in bloom. "I have only ever seen them in books...fantastic!"

The climb was filled with such wonders. It seemed with each new run, another fascinating creature befell us. Digital camera memory cards and glass vials were eagerly filled with specimens. As the scissor clipping and camera clicking continued the group failed to realize the onrush of twilight, which is common in the tropics.

"Damn lighting." Robin blatted. His camera was unable to focus properly on the crawling beetle which slipped under a leaf. I looked about, recognizing the quickness with which the sun had set. "Ah, the tropical sun, she's like a woman who gets you all hot and sweaty for a time, then sets off for other horizons just when you need her the most."

Robin looked at me annoyingly, "Ok, Ok, let's get up there before the mosquitoes start in." The group had got way ahead of us because of Robins age and shortness of breath. Only a few were still on the runs and we could still hear their muffled voices and camera shutters.

You see, the problem with Robin is that when he gets bit my a mosquito, he's bit. Being a diabetic, he always reacts violently to their bites and is acutely effected by them. We gathered our specimens and camera equipment together and started up at a quickened pace.

"Phil, where's your flashlights?" Robin queried as the steps became more and more difficult to see. I quickly stopped and began digging through my bag.

"Why is it that whenever you need something it is ALWAYS on the bottom!" I bitched.

Then it happened...SLAP! Robin whopped a mosquito, which had alighted on his delectable neck.

"Here they come, he groaned, do you have any mosquito spray?" I looked up at Robin who was still rubbing his neck. "One thing at a time, my dear boy, one thing at a time."

"Ohh!" Suddenly, Robin grimaced in agony and reeled around as if he had been attacked from behind. He started flailing his arms around as if something was on him which he couldn't see.

"Get it off, get it off!" he screamed. Dropping the bag, yet still clutching the flashlight I had just grouped out of the bottom, I stood up frantically looking in the darkness at Robins back to see what all the fuss was about. "Hold still, I can't see a thing."

Robin continued to dance about swinging his arms in all directions stumbling and nearly falling off the ladder system.

"Watch out, you're gonna fall you dumb ass!" I yelled while grabbing his shirt and pulling him down off his feet. Popping on the light I suddenly saw an absolutely gigantic mosquito the size of a mouse, planted directly into the middle of Robins spine. "Holy shit." I choked. I hesitated swatting it off due to the size of the mosquito; I was afraid it would leave it's proboscis in Robin's spine. By now Robins flailing became more exhausted. Dropping to my knees, I saw an opportunity to grab the creature and pull it straight off his back while trying not to break it in the process. "Hold still, hold still, I got it." I warned. Grasping it tightly I pulled straight back. Robins motions became slower and more rhythmic.

His head was sagging down on his chest and he slumped over. Fascinated, I looked at the mosquito as I removed it's long snout. Robin gave out a horrible scream, as if his whole life was being drawn out of him at one time.

"I got it I got it." I countered. The animal was absolutely bloated with Robins blood which was trickling out of its hypodermic-like snout which was still pumping.

Robin remained motionless as I slowly rose, carrying the mouse size mosquito in my hand and examining it, and walked around to the front of him. Still staring at the mosquito in my hand with fascination and horror I began babbling frantically, "Can you imagine what the guys back home are gonna say when we show them this god-awful thing? Hey, what if we call it a mouse-squito?"

While I was still talking I flashed the light down on Robin and noticed his beard seemed odd. "Robin," I questioned. "Are you alright?" Squatting down I shone the light directly in Robins face,

I reeled in horror, collapsing to my knees, as an even larger rat-sized mosquito was feeding straight between his eyes. It's large hooked toe claws dug determinedly into each side of Robins head. It's hairy body looked like a winged beard. Blood was running down Robins face. It was coming out of every conceivable place on his face: eye sockets, mouth, ears, and nose. As the mosquito continued to ensanguinate Robin his eyeballs collapsed like two socks being pulled back into his skull. The beasts hairy legs and body began to prickle as the engorgement continued. All I could do was sit in horrific fascination as the arthropod continued its feasting. Robins head began to shift and falter like a deflating balloon falling down further and further into his neck and body cavity. Suddenly, I noticed another giant mosquito was attached to the back of his neck and it too was gigantic with blood and serum. A deep rage filled my whole being as the reality of what was taking place finally brought me to my senses.

A power beyond myself pulled me to my feet and I leaned in to savage the evil creatures who were destroying my friend and mentor.

Pain upon pain pierced me in the side, *one got me!* Uncontrollably, I gashed at the offense with my flashlight,

only to feel even more pain and agony pumping into me. It seemed as if a large round ball of prickles was on me and I felt great pressure increasing as the mosquito pulled harder with its hooked feet and drove it's proboscis deeper inside me. The harder I pulled the more agonizing the pain became. Wave after wave of nausea and adrenaline rushed over me. Great globs of blood blew out of my mouth as the creatures lance drove deeper and deeper.

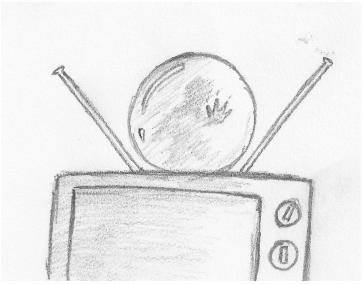
My sanity, my vision, and my life ebbed in and out of my consciousness. I felt myself falling as a feather from a table. Slowly drifting...falling...falling.

As I lay on the run, I could hear footsteps and the faint clicking of cameras. There were voices both startled and excited....

Then silence.

The Thing in the Amber

Richard Archer



"Where's my money Phil?"

Fitzwilliam finished this sentence with a sharp punch to Phil's stomach.

As the air shot out of his lungs with a whoosh, Phil found his words disappearing like his lost breath.

"Come on you junkie bastard, cough up. " Fitzwilliam pushed Phil onto the floor then stood over him.

Phil found his tongue, "Ain't got it, yet." He wheezed.

Fitzwilliam wasn't happy with this answer; he demonstrated this by administering a heavy kick to Phil's crotch.

Phil continued to find his tongue, "fuck," he blurted out, " I'll get your money just give me some more time."

Fitzwilliam glanced at his expensive looking watch, "you got until tomorrow morning. If you don't get to the Red Cow before I have my breakfast tomorrow I'll find you and make this meeting seem like you were just having a nice dream."

Phil lay still until he was sure Fitzwilliam had walked away, twelve hours to find four hundred quid what was he going to do?

As night began to fall Phil his luck at zero strolled round the housing estate, despite threats, polite requests and

even downright begging no one he knew had any money they could lend him. They all blamed the recession but Phil reckoned they thought he'd be in hospital tomorrow so weren't going to waste cash on him. Even after he had left one hooded teenager on his knees cradling a broken and bloody nose he still was no closer to the money he needed.

He thought about hiding but he had nowhere to go, he couldn't run away as he had no money to leave town with and he couldn't leave his mom anyway she needed help. Beside if he did skip out on his debt he couldn't come back and with no money he would be reduced to selling his arse again and he didn't want to get back into that game. Anyway Fitzwilliam was a downright mean bastard he'd have no problems with taking what he needed from Phil's mom probably putting her in hospital at the same time. No Phil knew he must get the money he owed but how?

Phil reached the end of the street and there paused wishing he had a cigarette or even better just a bit of blow to keep the worry at bay. As he sat on a crumbling brick wall Phil's eyes were caught by the house opposite. It was an end terrace that until recently had been boarded up. Now the boards were down and a light shone out from a downstairs window.

New tenants thought Phil and with new tenants came new property that maybe he could steal and turn into cold hard cash. Phil remembered the house when it had been boarded up, the window at the back had a faulty catch which he had learnt to easily flip open with his knife so he could get in and take his drug of choice in private. The local authorities round here were penny pinching bastards he'd bet that window was still loose, all he had to do was wait for the new arrivals to go to bed and he could break in.

But what if they were a big family or had a large angry dog? Phil paused he needed money not a night in the local cells. As he searched vainly through his pockets for a cigarette the door of the newly occupied house opened and an old man slowly walked out. The new occupant seemed

frail and slow as he inched towards the bin his rubbish in one hand and a walking stick helping him balance in the other. He then deposited the rubbish and inched his way back again to his front door closing it slowly behind him.

Phil smiled the robbery was now a dead cert.

* * *

Later on when all decent folk were safely tucked up in their beds Phil crept back through the streets to the old man's house. Sneaking down an alley at the side of the house he quickly donned balaclava and gloves before hopping over the wall into the back yard. All the lights in the house were now out and Phil quickly made it to the back window. Studying it as well as he could in the pale glow of the street lights Phil smiled; the catch had not been mended. He pulled out his knife a short nasty looking blade and sliding in the window frame quickly flipped the catch and carefully pushed the window up. The old window made a sound of protest as Phil opened it so he paused for a few minutes. Nothing happened no lights came on so Phil presuming the old man he had seen earlier must be deaf pushed the window fully up and hopped over the sill into the room.

Phil's practiced eye swung over the room's contents looking for the easy pickings that he could quickly sell. As he stood on the threadbare carpet Phil realised this might not be easy. The room was quite bare with peeling wallpaper and the damp smell of a place unoccupied. Phil swore to himself he should have checked to see if there was anything worth pinching before risking a break in but the need for money had made him careless. He moved cautiously over to the TV set, it like the room was old and uncared for.

Phil swore again there was nothing here except boxes of rubbish and old but worthless knick knacks. Should he risk another room? As he moved closer to the door something on top of the TV set caught Phil's eye.

Sitting on the top of the set was a lump of glass that was nearly as big as Phil's head. Phil moved closer it was difficult to see in the dim light but the glass was dark in colour as it seemed to drink in the light around it. Phil picked it up and moved with it over to the window so as to study it closer, it was a dark orange colour and Phil began to think what he might be able to sell it for. As a stray beam of moonlight penetrated the clouds it struck the glass object and Phil nearly dropped it in surprise. He could see something was inside the glass, if he looked closer he could make out a pale shape unmoving under the dark surface.

The room light flicked on and Phil turned half blinded but just able to see the old man had come into the lounge. One of his hands was at the light switch the other optimistically raised his walking stick as some sort of improvised club.

"Put my amber down now," the old man said.

Phil acted fast hoping the old man hadn't called the police, he moved quickly across the room striking out at him hoping to knock the stick from his hands. It might have been the effect of the light still part blinding Phil but his blow went wild and the amber chunk in his hands struck the old man on the side of his head causing him to fall to the floor with a thud.

Phil dropped the amber and whether it20had been weakened by the blow or was old anyway it shattered as it hit the floor and pieces of it scattered as big chunks rolled under a chair. Phil thought quickly and examined the old man, luckily he was just knocked out so he decided to take a chance these old types never trusted banks he might have some cash stashed upstairs. Wasting no time Phil leapt over the prone body and running into the hall took the stairs two at a time. He quickly located the old man's bedroom and with a skill born from years of practice expertly tore into it looking for any likely hiding places for rolls of cash. Two minutes later he was disappointed he had found nothing but dust and cockroaches. He was considering searching the other upstairs

rooms when he heard a gurgling scream from downstairs. He paused he ought to check the old man and perhaps he could loosen his tongue with a bit of persuasion and find where he stashed anything valuable.

Re-entering the lounge Phil saw the old man was now awake blood dribbling from a savage looking cut on his face. With one hand he tried to staunch it while he directed his other arm to swing his walking stick under the chair.

"Come out," the old man cried, oblivious it seemed to Phil.

The sweeping under the chair having no effect the old man sat back against a wall and fishing a handkerchief from his pocket dabbed at his ripped cheek. He now seemed to notice Phil and said, "you young fool you've set it loose."

"What are you on about you old fart," Phil said, pushing his balaclava slightly up to reveal his mouth but no more.

"The creature trapped in the amber."

Phil wondered if his blow had knocked the sense from the old man but then remembered he had seen something in the amber himself.

"What is it?"

"I don't know sonny, it's been in my family for years, my grandfather was in the navy and travelled the world he bought it back from somewhere. He always said it was valuable and..."

Phil's eyes lit up, "valuable."

"Yes its one of a kind, dangerous but valuable."

Phil now seeing nothing but money ignored the old man, he didn't care where this thing in the amber had come from all he saw was his debt to Fitzwilliam paid and maybe money to spare. He wasn't sure who would buy such a creature but he could worry about that later first he must capture it. He fingered his knife but decided not to use it yet this creature might be worth more alive than dead.

Phil knelt down and began to look under the chair where the old man had been swinging his stick; the chair had

a mouldy fringe that hung down onto the floor making seeing what was under there, difficult. Using one hand Phil lifted it up and bent down further to look closer.

As his head moved down two things happened at once first of all the bulb in the lounge went out secondly as soon as the dark hit the room as fist of what felt like razor sharp needles raked Phil's forehead. Phil gasped and fell backwards onto the old man blood pouring down his face and into his eyes blinding him. He felt a thud on his chest something had landed on him but he couldn't see what it was and before he had time to react it began to tear at his clothes as if it was trying to burrow into him.

"Stay still I can get the little bastard," he heard the old man say.

Blows began to reign on Phil's chest as he realised the old man was beating him with his stick the thing turned its attention from trying to burrow into Phil's chest and the weight on him was gone.

"Hold on," there was a ripping sound and Phil felt a bandage of some sort being applied to his head, his eyesight cleared to see the old man mopping his face with a blood stained handkerchief. Part of the old man's dressing gown was torn away and Phil guessed where the bandage had come from.

Brushing his nursemaid aside Phil said, "where did it go? I've got to have it."

"I think it went upstairs."

Phil realised that to bandage his forehead the old man had removed his balaclava and despite it being dark had seen his face, well he would worry about that later.

"What happened to the lights?"

"I think the metre has run out of money."

Light first thought Phil then the creature would be his.

"Where's the electric metre?"

"In the cupboard in the hall."

Phil fumbled in his pockets these old metres needed coins and he had none.

"Got any change granddad?" He asked the old man.

"I keep a saucer by the metre with some coins in, there might be enough in there."

Phil cautiously stepped out into the hall, there under the stairs was a cupboard door, he gripped the handle with trepidation then scolded himself. How could that thing be in there as if could reach a door handle. Phil felt stupid and opened the cupboard. There on the wall was the electric metre and on top of it was the saucer and coins. Phil fed the metre until there was a whirring and clicking noise and the hall light came back on.

Now for the creature Phil thought as he came out of the cupboard.

As he entered the hall instantly he felt a blow from behind and sharp claws penetrate his clothes and lodge in the flesh of his back. He cried out in pain trying to slam his body back against the wall to dislodge the thing that now attacked him. His back felt warm and wet he was bleeding, an obscene sound almost like a giggle came from the thing as Phil twisted and turned trying to get his hands on the creature or shake it off but all to no avail.

Phil fell forward and his head caught a door frame bringing unconsciousness.

How long he'd been out for Phil wasn't sure as he shook his head, the wounds on his back were sticky but not bleeding so it couldn't have been long. He drew his knife alive or dead he was getting that creature and getting rich. He opened the door back into the lounge determined to question the old man thoroughly and get some idea of what he was facing. He cursed, the old man was lying in the centre of the room face up twitching. Thinking the shock must be too much for him Phil knelt down wandering how you helped someone possibly having a heart attack. The body twitched and spasmed then suddenly stopped. Phil relaxed his hold he

needed to find the thing and fast no policeman would believe him that he didn't frighten this old man to death.

There was a movement under the bloodstained dressing gown, Phil stared in horror as it began to tear and in an eruption of blood, flesh and bone a scaly hand tipped with sharp claws burst through into the air. The thing was inside the old man he hadn't been having a heart attack it had been burrowing inside him doing god knows what.

Phil fought the rise of nausea inside his stomach this was his chance he took his tattered jacket off and prepared to pounce as the thing emerged, he had a vague plan of wrapping it up then quickly putting it somewhere sturdier like an oven or fridge while he worked out what to do.

A second clawed hand thrust through the old man0s chest flexing in the air as casual it seemed as someone stretching before getting out of bed. Phil was ready his improvised net clutched to his chest. A bulge began to appear in the chest scaly in pattern. Phil guessed it was the head ready to appear he swallowed hard ready or not he thought.

As he bent over slightly shaking a blow struck his head, small areas of pain began to erupt across the struck area turning into one large fountain of pain and shock. Something was on his head tearing at the improvised bandage. Phil dropped his net and grasped at his head as he did so the thing inside the old man forced its way out of his corpse like a scene from a grisly childbirth.

Phil had time to see it was like a small scaly rat like creature, grey in colour where the blood dripped away. Its two slit like green eyes looked at him and it opened a mouth filled with needle like teeth to let loose an obscene giggle before leaping at Phil's face.

There's two of them Phil thought before it mercifully all went dark.

Incubites

S.E.COX



"Samantha Deaton is the fifth person in Leyton to die from necrotizing fasciitis, more commonly known as the flesh-eating bacteria.

"Samantha, who had just celebrated her twenty-first birthday last Friday evening had been out on the town drinking with her friends before tragedy struck. It was reported that Samantha wasn't feeling well and went home early to her flat in Leyton Central. No one had heard from or seen her for two days afterwards until her mother went to check on her. She was found in her bed eaten alive from the inside out.

"Jackson Smith is with her mother now in Leyton Central. Jackson what can you tell us about this awful tragedy?"

Trent Ryder was fixed to the TV screen, listening with wide eyes to the news reporter, as he slowly slurped his cereal from the bowl.

"Trent could you please turn that off," said his mother, traipsing down the stairs in her white fluffy dressing gown and matching slippers. "I have heard nothing but that story all week and I do not want to hear about it over breakfast."

She walked into the kitchen yawning, her slippers slapping beneath her as she grabbed a glass from the cupboard and trudged over to the sink to fill it up with cold water.

"Sure mum, sorry," replied Trent rolling his eyes and rising from his chair at the kitchen table to manually switch off the small portable TV. "Thought you loved a bit of blood and guts in the morning."

His mother put down the glass and screwed up her face as if she was about to throw up. "I get enough of that at work; I don't need it on my day off."

Trent's mother was a ward sister at Leyton Central General Hospital. For the past month she had been hearing about these now five victims of the strange flesh eating bacteria epidemic, and alongside that a number of patients were convinced that they had it when they didn't.

"Are you seeing Cassie this morning?"

"Naw, going for a run around the park, may see her later tonight though," Trent replied, walking over to the kitchen sink and dumping his breakfast bowl into it.

"Trent, its Saturday, surely you can take a day off from training."

"Not when I'm training for the marathon."

His mother shifted her attention to the empty cereal bowl he had just dropped into the sink. "Are you going to wash that or leave it for me to do?" she asked with an accusing tone in her voice and raising an eyebrow.

"Leave it for you to do?" said Trent, with a cheeky grin on his face.

"Wrong answer."

"OK, OK," said Trent throwing his hands into the air. "Just let me go and get changed first."

"Yes, you do that, and while you're at it, maybe you could bring down the dirty clothes that have been gathering under your bed. Any longer and they will be crawling out by themselves."

Trent stopped at the kitchen door with his back to his mother, mouthing her words in a sarcastic fashion, making sure to speak out loud. "Yes, mother."

* * *

"Come on Ryder, once more around the park and we're done," puffed Chuck, Trent's running partner and best friend. They had been friends since primary school and only lived two blocks away from each other.

Trent on the other hand was barely panting. His heart raced, but with adrenaline rather than being knackered from the running session.

"Chuck, you really need to fit some more training in," he laughed, stretching out his arms above his head. "Look at the state of you; you look like the living dead."

Trent may have been joking but he was right. Chuck didn't look to good. His face was pale, verging on a tint of blue. His eyes seem to bulge out from his face with dark dusty rings beneath them. Trent became more and more concerned for his friend as Chuck clutched at his stomach and cried out.

"Jesus mate, are you alright?"

"Uh-huh," Chuck managed to say nodding his head. "Just a bit of cramping that's all. I'll be fine in a minute."

Trent nodded his head but his eyes were still filled with concern for his best friend, but Chuck insisted he just had a minor stomach cramp from not warming up properly. Trent took him by his word and helped Chuck over to a nearby bench shaded by a large oak tree with stretched out branches. "Are you sure you are OK man?" asked Trent, still unsure of his friends condition. "I can always go fetch my mum; she's at home off work today."

"I said I am fine!" Chuck snapped, much to Trent's surprise. Not once in the thirteen years he had been friends with Chuck, had he ever snapped the way he just did. "Can we just go get some food, I am starving."

Trent thought that Chuck would do nothing but throw up any food that he tried to force down now, but Chuck insisted that he was hungry.

"OK, you want to come back to my place for something?" He threw back his head and squirting water from his water bottle into his mouth and over his sweaty face.

"Yeah, I can do that. Do you have steak?" he asked, practically salivating at the thought as the question left his lips. "I am so in the mood for a nice juicy steak."

Trent's brow furrowed as he looked at the sudden change of attitude in his friend. Chuck was suddenly almost giddy. "Er...I'm not sure...I'll have to check..."

Chuck jumped up and threw his back pack over his right shoulder. "Come on then, let's get out of here."

Trent paused for a moment. There was something really strange going on with his friend. He knew this, because he knew Chuck inside and out. But instead of continually questioning his friend, he decided to hang back and wait for Chuck to come to him. They were best friends, why wouldn't Chuck come to Trent with his problems. After all a problem shared...

"Hey Ryder, do you have something for me?" called Cassie as she jogged over to them from the other side of the park. Her long dirty blonde hair flew backwards with the wind, placing her bare shoulders on display. It was a beautiful sunny and hot day for once, and strange considering it was only the middle of April, when it was still usually wet and dreary. She wasn't your average pretty blue-eyed blonde-haired girl, the ones that would usually strut their stuff around school wearing nothing but miniskirts and spaghetti string tops, and had to the have the most up to date fashionable shoes and accessories that were on the market.

No, Cassie was completely the opposite. Although, she was the most beautiful thing that Trent had ever laid eyes on, with her twenty-six inch waist and curvaceous features; her thick long blonde hair and her sparkling blue eyes like two twin pools of oceanic serenity.

"Come here you," she said with a wicked glint in her eye. Grabbing Trent's face with both hands, she pulled him forwards and planted a hot and heavy kiss on his puckered up

lips. After a few long seconds of intense pashing, Chuck coughed uncomfortably, breaking their clinch. "Oh I am sorry Charles, didn't see you there." Cassie stuck her tongue out him and took Trent by the hand.

Chuck grimaced. "Don't call me that. Anyway, you got one of those for me?" He closed his eyes and pursed his lips.

Trent playfully smacked his best friends shoulder and guffawed. "Don't you even think about it pal, this one is all mine." He threw his arm around Cassie and pulled her close as the three off them continued back to Trent's house. "Anyway, you seem to have perked up Chuck."

Chuck shrugged and smiled. "Told you, just a stomach cramp."

* * *

"Hey mom, you still hanging about?" asked Trent chuckling as all three made their way into the house via the back door. His mother was sat at the kitchen table hunched over a pile of paper-work, dressed in her sweats.

She didn't answer; instead her eyes were fixated on the small portable T.V on the corner of the work bench.

"Mom?" said Trent, walking over and waving his hand in front of her face.

Cassie and Chuck stood at the door and watched Trent's mother disappear into the program on the T.V whilst monotonously chewing on the tip of a black biro.

She quickly snapped her head up and blinked a few times. "Sorry son, I was in a world of my own there."

"Yeah, you don't say."

His mother turned around in her chair and smiled upon seeing Cassie and Chuck. "Hi Cassie," she said making a short wave gesture with her right hand. "How's your mother doing now?"

"She's getting better now thank you, Mrs. Ryder," replied Cassie cheerfully. "The antibiotics are really doing their job now."

Trent's mother laughed. "Cassie darling, how many times do I have to tell you to call me Sylvie?"

Cassie blushed and smiled. "Sorry...Sylvie..."

Chuck began fidgeting and twitching on the spot and a loud grumbling sound broke the moment's silence. He looked down holding his stomach.

"Chuck, are you OK love?" asked Sylvie, turning in the direction of the noise.

With a scrunched-up face, Chuck shook his head. "I don't feel too good actually."

Sylvie stood up from the kitchen table and instantly shot into 'nurse' mode. She gently touched his forehead, and then rubbed her fingers together. The tips were moist; Chuck seemed to have a sudden fever.

"You do have a temperature Chuck. Why don't you go lie down upstairs and I will give your mother a call."

"My mum isn't home..." his words were cut off with another loud grumble.

Suddenly he screamed out clutching his abdomen and collapsed to his knees.

Cassie, standing next to him by the back door, dropped to floor placing her hands on his shoulders. "Jesus Chuck, you're shaking. Are you alright?"

"Obviously not you stupid bitch!" Chuck roared, his face now a deep shade of red and profusely billowing with droplets of sweat.

Cassie recoiled. She had never heard him speak like that before.

Chuck roared with such intensity of pain, it forced him forward, throwing himself onto his stomach.

"Shit mum this is bad. What the hell is wrong with him?" cried Trent, pushing a stunned Cassie out of the way.

"Watch your language Trent," said Sylvie calmly. "You help him upstairs while I call the ambulance."

"What about Cassie?"

Sylvie walked over to Cassie and opened the back door. "Cassie dear, get yourself off home. I'm sure Chuck didn't mean what he said, he seems to be in a lot of pain."

Cassie blankly nodded her head without saying a word and slowly maneuvered herself out of the house.

Trent struggled to help Chuck up and towards the stairs. Heaving his best friend up and placing Chuck arm across his shoulders, Trent wrapped his arm around Chuck's middle and dragged him.

Trent kicked open his bedroom door and dropped Chuck onto his bed. Chucked writhed around in pain as Trent look on.

Suddenly Chuck sprang into a sitting position and patted his stomach. Lifting his hand to his face, it glistened wet and scarlet. Looking down, the same colour began spilling through his white T-shirt, swimming around his body like ink through water.

"Shit Chuck!" cried Trent, backing away from his friend, his heart racing as he watched him lift up his blood soaked T-shirt. "What the fuck is that?"

"I don't know man, but its fucking killing me!" The fresh peachy colour had begun draining from his face, and as he spoke, Trent could see the inside of his mouth and gums were beginning to turn blue.

"We have to get you to the hospital," said Trent, trying to remain calm, but the rumbling in the pit of his stomach was quickly rising, ready to expel everything he had eaten that afternoon.

Whatever it was that was inside Chuck's stomach, was trying to work its way out of him, and it wouldn't be long before the task had been completed.

Within minutes, Chuck's insides were beginning to spill out of the ragged hole in his stomach where he had lifted up his shirt. He could no longer speak, only gargled bloody noises could he make as he held out his hands to Trent. Trent backed away as Chuck fell to his knees. Tent watched in revulsion as Chuck held his hand on his stomach

only for his intestines to slip through his fingers into a bloody mess on his bedroom floor.

"Help me..." Chuck gargled, spraying blood from his mouth.

Suddenly, a dark shadow whipped across the room. It looked as though it had come from Chuck as his body lay limp across the floor as he bled out.

A buzzing could be heard in the room as Trent stood frozen to the spot following the shadow with only his eyes. The shadow resembled a swarm of insects, swooping and diving through the air. It circled above Chucks head and suddenly within seconds, it had evaporated.

Trent had been holding his breath for so long he thought he would pass out, but quickly he rushed to his friend on the floor and placed a trembling hand on his neck. Chuck had been laid face down, not looking like he was breathing. Trent needed to check for a pulse.

Nothing.

"Chuck," he said shaking his friend. "Chuck, please wake up."

Chucks body jolted violently, scaring the crap out of Trent as he jumped backwards and fell against the bedroom door slamming it shut. "Chuck...?"

Trent watched as Chucks head slowly began to rise and twist around as his body stayed still on the ground. Trent closed his eyes tight and clenched his teeth tight as Chucks head did a full one eighty turn and stared up at the bedroom ceiling, the bones in his neck clicking one by one.

Loud banging on the door forced his eyes open.

"Trent is Chuck OK?" she called from the other side of the door. "What is going on in there?"

"Mum don't come in here!"

Suddenly Chuck opened up his mouth wide and let out an ear piercing scream filling the ceiling and walls in a wash of scarlet. Then from Chuck's mouth, the shadow swarm emerged. Chucks body fell limp again.

The swarm came straight for him.

Trent ran around the room, over his bed and bedside table, sending the small lamp light hurtling to the floor, the bulb smashing as it fell. He swatted at the air in a bid to keep it away, but it was no use. The buzzing surrounded him.

"Trent, open this door now!" demanded Sylvie.

The door was locked.

The buzzing stopped and he stood still again. A small gust of wind flew up his top and a stabbing pain shot through his stomach. He lifted up his shirt to numerous black dots all over his body. The shadow had broken up and was eating its way through his stomach.

Trent screamed out in pain, the feeling of a thousand razor blades slicing through his body. They bore deep and began working their way around under his skin. He could feel them in his neck, wriggling beneath the epidermis, up into his face. Trent threw his body around the room creating more mess and noise. He clawed at his face as black dots appeared in front of his eyes, pins pricking at his eyeballs.

"Trent, I'm coming in!" Sylvie shouted as she began bashing at the door.

"No!" Trent screamed until around him filled with darkness and he no longer existed.

* * *

They hide in the shadows, swooping in and out of dark houses in the dead of night. They slither up stairs and along hallways, looking for sleeping humans. But not any human will do. They cannot be too old or too young and their blood must be pure; free from sickness and disease. Until they find the perfect victim they lie in wait, feeding off of dead skin cells shed by anyone or anything; keeping themselves strong until the chosen one is found. They move in packs of a hundred, invisible to the naked eye. There can be as many as a million lurking in one household.

Individually they are only an inch in size. A flat, black, round body like a two pence coin with a pin prick of a tail

that spins round when they move. They are barely discernible, but the strength to burrow a hole in the thickest of stone. Two beady eyes; scarlet red around the pupils on the underbelly, and a mouth that opens as wide as their bodies. Only a brief shadow can be seen when they move, but that is only if you see them by chance.

Usually through the day they hibernate inside cracks in walls or under floorboards. If you did see them, you wouldn't know. To you, all it was, was a shadow or your mind playing tricks on you.

But while you sleep, they hunt. They hunt for their host. A perfect host to lay they eggs in. When the host is found, they call the rest of the pack by running their long sticky poisonous tongues against the back of their yellow, jagged teeth causing a high pitched drumming sound; much like the sound of a cricket and also mistaken for one if ever you were to hear it and when they move together, a buzzing sound is created. Low and annoying. They clump together and slither up bed posts and under the covers and while the leader breaks free and slithers up the leg of the chose host, the rest of the pack scurry around for dead skin and dust until the body is prepared for plantation.

The leader spins its tail faster and faster; turning it into a fierce drill to burrow into the stomach of the host. To prevent the host waking from his or her slumber, it bites down in exactly the right place just below the navel and the poison from its tongue numbs the area. Once it is ready, the females vomit their eggs, consumed in protective green slime, into the hollowed out pocket of warm flesh. The slime protecting the eggs acts as a healing agent and by morning, the host human would not be aware of anything that had happened.

They will be back in one month's time to collect their offspring. They hunt. They feed. They impregnate. They are, The Incubites.

Author Biographies

Creature Features – Charlotte Gledson

Charlotte Emma Gledson currently resides in the south-coastal town of Gosport UK. Her heart however yearns to return to her roots in the Northwest of England, specifically Cumbria. With over 20 stories and poems published in Anthologies and Magazines, Charlotte is currently penning a supernatural novel called 'Bluebells For My Baby'. Her collection of twisted tales entitled The Lonely Tree and Other Twisted Tales of Torment is OUT now on Amazon.co.uk

Earthen Demons – Kerry Morgan

Kerry Morgan has been dishing up terror for over thirty years, and she still adores it. She has a number of publishing credits in Zines as well as Anthologies. Kerry has a novel called The Astral Avenger and is working on its sequel. Mrs. Morgan will have two shorts published in the Ladies of Horror Anthology. She enjoys posting a continuing story on her blog hosted by myspace, and will be attending the Rock and Shock Horror Convention in October to help with the New England Horror Writer's Association table where she will be selling and signing her novel. Please visit her sites at kerryamorgan.com and her new Ezine http://www.paganimagination.com: myspace/krymrgn

The Lake – Jack Burton

Jack Burton resides in the Arizonan deserts. When he's not busy preparing for the zombie apocalypse he spends his time teaching, listening to heavy metal and indulging in all things horror related. Some of his stories can be found in the upcoming anthologies: The Middle of Nowhere, Christmas is Dead, Bonded by Blood II, and Elements of Horror.

The Thing's Lullaby – Rick MQuiston

Rick McQuiston has been writing horror fiction for years and has had nearly 200 publications so far. He's written four anthology books, and is currently working on his first novel, a zombie tale titled "To See as a God Sees", as well as a collection of novellas. He's also a guest author at Memphis Junior High School and is planning on opening up spaces in neighboring Michigan shows and schools.

The Promise – Terence Kuch

Terence Kuch is a consultant, avid hiker, and world traveler. His publications and acceptances include Clockwise Cat, Colored Chalk, Marginalia, Noctober, North American Review, Northwest Review, qarrtsiluni, Slow Trains, Sonar-4, Timber Creek Review, etc. He has studied at the Writers Center, Bethesda, Maryland, and is a member of the Dark Fiction Guild.

The Third Floor – William Pauley III

WILLIAM PAULEY III is a living, breathing human being who holds his own in the dark and bloody hills of Kentucky. His fists are in a constant struggle to find the perfect medium between art and rage. His writing collection, entitled LIVINHELL: The Demon Writings of William Pauley III, was recently published and is available for purchase at Amazon.com.

Butter Flower – A.J. Brown

AJ Brown is a southern born writer with a penchant for the darker side of literature. He is currently dabbling in keeping a thick skin, mostly beside his chair in the office, but sometimes on his person.

So That's How the Biscuits Crumbled – A.E. Churchyard

A.E. Churchyard lives in South Wales with her partner of fourteen years, two young children and two cats.She is a secondary school Teacher but has been writing for as long as she can remember and has had several poems published. Her first Short Story was published in Mausoleum Memoirs. Ms. Churchyard is also a member several writing websites where her work is gaining popularity.

The Messers – Suzie Bradshaw

Suzie loves speaking and writing about herself in the third person. She doubts that light is really the fastest thing in the Universe and in her next life she will prove Einstein wrong. But in this life all she wants to do is write. Is that a song? She's had stories published on Microhorror ,SNM Horrormag. and newflesh magazine. She's never been happier in her life and would like to thank you for reading.

Jonah and the Dead – Eric S. Brown

Eric S Brown is a 34 year old zombie author living in North Carolina. Some of his books include Season of Rot, World War of the Dead, Barren Earth (with Stephen North), and among others. His short fiction has been published hundreds of times in such anthologies and magazines as The Undead, Zombology, Dead Science, The Dead Worlds series, Dark Wisdom, Story House, etc. Bigfoot War, his latest book, will be released in late 2009. You can find the bulk of his books on www.amazon.com if interested.

The Lunatic Brigade – Kevin Wallis

Kevin's easy-going nature and penchant for laughter are merely clever ruses to hide the mass of worm-infested blackness that substitutes for his soul. He plans on unleashing his unbound evil on the populace at-large just as soon as he finishes his 2 daughters' homeschool lessons, changes his son's poop diaper, and rubs his wife's feet for awhile

What Is Left Behind – John C. Lewis

John Lewis has been interested in the worlds of horror, Fantasy, and Science Fiction since a very early age when he was first exposed to an issue of "Famous Monsters of Filmland." Once bitten, his love for horror grew, eventually leading him to the business of movie making. Today, when not working on movies (he just finished "Bikini Monsters" as assistant director) John can be found busy at the computer working on tales of horror and the supernatural as well as finishing the screenplay for his next full-length feature, "Vampire Holocaust." His first full-length novel, "Pillars of Fire" is now being edited. John lives in Florida with his daughter Ashley, his phenomenal grandson Gavyn. Visit him at www.creatureproductions.com

Night Crawler – Donna Jean Lyons

Donna Jean Lyons is a retired steelworker, who recently escaped a maximum-security women's prison for the criminally insane. She was last spotted fleeing the secluded mountains of West Virginia , dragging behind her a freshly acquired girlfriend and being followed by her two tick-infested Hell Hounds. Her true whereabouts remain a mystery. Her uncensored stories have shown up in House of Horror and her writing will appear in Issue #10 of The Monster Next Door December 15, 2009.

Manifestation – John Bruni

John Bruni's work has appeared (or will appear) in issues of SHROUD, CTHULHU SEX, THE MONSTERS NEXT DOOR, AOIFE'S KISS, TRAIL OF INDISCRETION, TALES OF THE TALISMAN, THE NOCTURNAL LYRIC, DETECTIVE MYSTERY STORIES, and others, including NITEBLADE's anthology, LOST INNOCENCE, the critically acclaimed VILE THINGS anthology from Comet Press, and the forthcoming TOOTH DECAY anthology from Sonar 4. He was the poetry editor of MIDDLEWESTERN VOICE, and he

was the editor of TABARD INN: TALES OF QUESTIONABLE TASTE. He lives in Elmhurst, IL.

Mardi Growl – Shane McKenzie

Shane McKenzie has been a horror fanatic since he was a kid. He still watches any horror movie he can get a hold of, the gorier the better. He has only been writing horror for about 8 months, but knows a good horror story when he sees one. He has stories published at Flashes in the Dark and House of Horror (before becoming the co-editor), as well as stories in the anthologies Mausoleum Memoirs and Creature Features. He lives in Austin, TX with his fiancee and three dogs where he works for the police department.

Returning to Eden – Jameson T. Caine

Jameson a writer residing in Northern California where he works as a tanker truck driver and live with my wife and our two Welsh Pembroke Corgis. His writing is defined by my love of monsters, whether they be hundred foot giants or tiny crawling things. This stems from being exposed to monster films at the age of four and never losing his passion for such creatures. He has stories sold to The Devil's Food anthology, The Rural Horror and The Bitter End anthologies from Pill Hill Press, The Scroll of Anubis anthology from the Library of Horror press as well as Sand issue #5 from Strange Publications, Blood Moon Rising #41, The Monsters Next Door issue #8, 52 Stitches, Everyday Weirdness, AlienSkin Magazine, The Nautilus Engine, Flashes in the Dark, Thaumatrope and Tweet the Meat.

Beach Comber – Kevin White

Kevin lives in Portland, Oregon with his wife and their four German shepherd dogs. He writes for fun and entertainment and finds true horror in the fact that he is actually old enough to have a grandchild. . .

The Thought Things – Jeff Skinner

Jeff's fiction has been published in the Horror Express, 7th Dimension Magazine, and many anthologies. He has three published novels: In the Eyes of Terror, Cynthia's Child, and the upcoming Mind gate.

Mine – C.A. Dawson

C.A. Dawson attended Texas Christian University , and T.C.C both in Fort Worth , Texas . She was first published at the age of sixteen being engrossed in dark poetry and has since been published in numerous magazines, anthologies, journals, reviews, and most recently her first Novel, Mind on Fire a psychological thriller. She lives in a little Texas town with her dog and cat.

Wet 'N' Wild – William Wood

William Wood can be found in an old farmhouse in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia with his beautiful wife and angelic children, all of whom love him dearly but whisper every time he leaves the room. He occasionally sleeps instead of writing. Approach him warily at omnitome@gmail.com.

The Worms – Deborah Walker

After a twenty year period of procrastination Deborah Walker has started to write short stories and poetry. She lives in London with her partner Chris and her two lovely, yet distracting young children. She recently won the MISFITS annual writing competition. Find her horror stories in Arkham Tales, Bards and Sages, Champagne Shivers, Tweet the Meat, and the upcoming Zombienauts and Scroll of Anubis Anthologies.

The Beast Of Hindu Kush – Steve E. Lowe

Steve Lowe is a sports journalist and author residing in South Bend, Ind. with his wife and two sons. He writes for the South Bend Tribune,

Irish Sports Report and Associated Press, and has been published in several national and regional newspapers and magazines. His fiction has appeared in The Absent Willow Review, House of Horror, Allegory, and the Dead Bait Anthology from Severed Press. In his spare time, such as it is, Steve plays a serviceable shortstop for various slowpitch softball teams and enjoys writing autobiographical blurbs in the third person.

Derelict – William Wilde

William Wilde lives in Oregon and writes Horror and Suspense fiction. His new Suspense novel Show Me is available from Synergebooks.com. Read an excerpt at his Author Webpage at wildebooks.inwarp.com.

Oscar – Doug Murano

Doug Murano lives somewhere in the wide-open spaces of the Great Plains of The United States. His fiction currently appears in Deadlines: An Anthology of Horror and Dark Fiction, in the flash-fiction horror anthology 52 Stitches, in Necrotic Tissue #7, and in Bull: Fiction for Thinking Men, among others. Additionally, his stories are scheduled to appear in the following anthologies: Zombology VI, Horrorology and Zombonauts. Visit him online at http://muranofiction.blogspot.com.

Big Sisters Get What They Deserve – Kathryn Ehrlich

Kathryn Ehrlich is currently living in Morgantown, West Virginia while she completes her two degrees at West Virginia University. Kathryn enjoys reading until the sun comes up the next day, or even the one after that, just to finish a book—even if it is a terrible book. Samples of Kathryn's writing can be found on WEbook.com, where she posts under the penname AuroraEos.

Tooth – Philip Harris

Philip Harris was born in England but now lives in Vancouver, Canada where he works for a large video game developer. Not content

with creating imaginary worlds for a living, he spends his spare time indulging his love of writing. His non-fiction articles have appeared in such enigmatic magazines as EXE, WTJ and CGI. His fiction has been published in Peeping Tom, Dark Horizons, and Blood Samples. He has also worked as security for Darth Vader.

Breaking and Entering – Stephanie Scarborough

Stephanie Scarborough's fiction has appeared in M-Brane SF, The Harrow, Every Day Fiction, and A Fly in Amber, and she has work forthcoming in Sand: A Journal of Strange Tales and A Thousand Faces. When not writing, you can find her riding her bicycle or doing the bidding of her feline overlords. Visit her blog at: http://hellostephanie.net.

The Lake Pact – David Bernstein

When David, A.K.A. MacabreZombie, isn't writing horror, he can be found reading or watching it. He's been published in a number of magazines and anthologies including those of the Library of the Living Dead Press, Elements of Horror, Living Dead Press, and Library of Horror Press. He believes hard work does pay off. He lives in the NYC area.

Then Silence – Phillip G Frank Jr

Other than a few movie scripts this is Phil's first official try at fiction. Phil is a Field Associate of the California Academy of Sciences and has authored and coauthored several scientific articles in the field of Herpetology. Reptile Care Magazine UK and Iguana Magazine are the most recent periodicals Phil has published with. Phil lives with his wife Debbie, their seven children, two dogs, six cats. He maintains several hundred turtles and various other reptiles and mammals which are bred on his farm in Central Florida, USA.

The Thing in the Amber – Richard Archer

Richard a 39 year old horror and sci fi fan from the Black Country

Incubites – S.E. COX

S.E.COX has been writing for ten years. Her work has appeared in The Monsters Next Door ezine, Pagan Imagination ezine and also Flashes in The Dark ezine. Alongside this, she has one novel published - Rosella, Forbidden Love and also a collection of her short stories to date, entitled Twisted Confusion. S.E.COX is a 25 year old single mom and resides in the West Midlands UK with her two children and the voices in her head...